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THE ANNIVERSARY ISSUE
FEBRUARY 12 & 19, 2024

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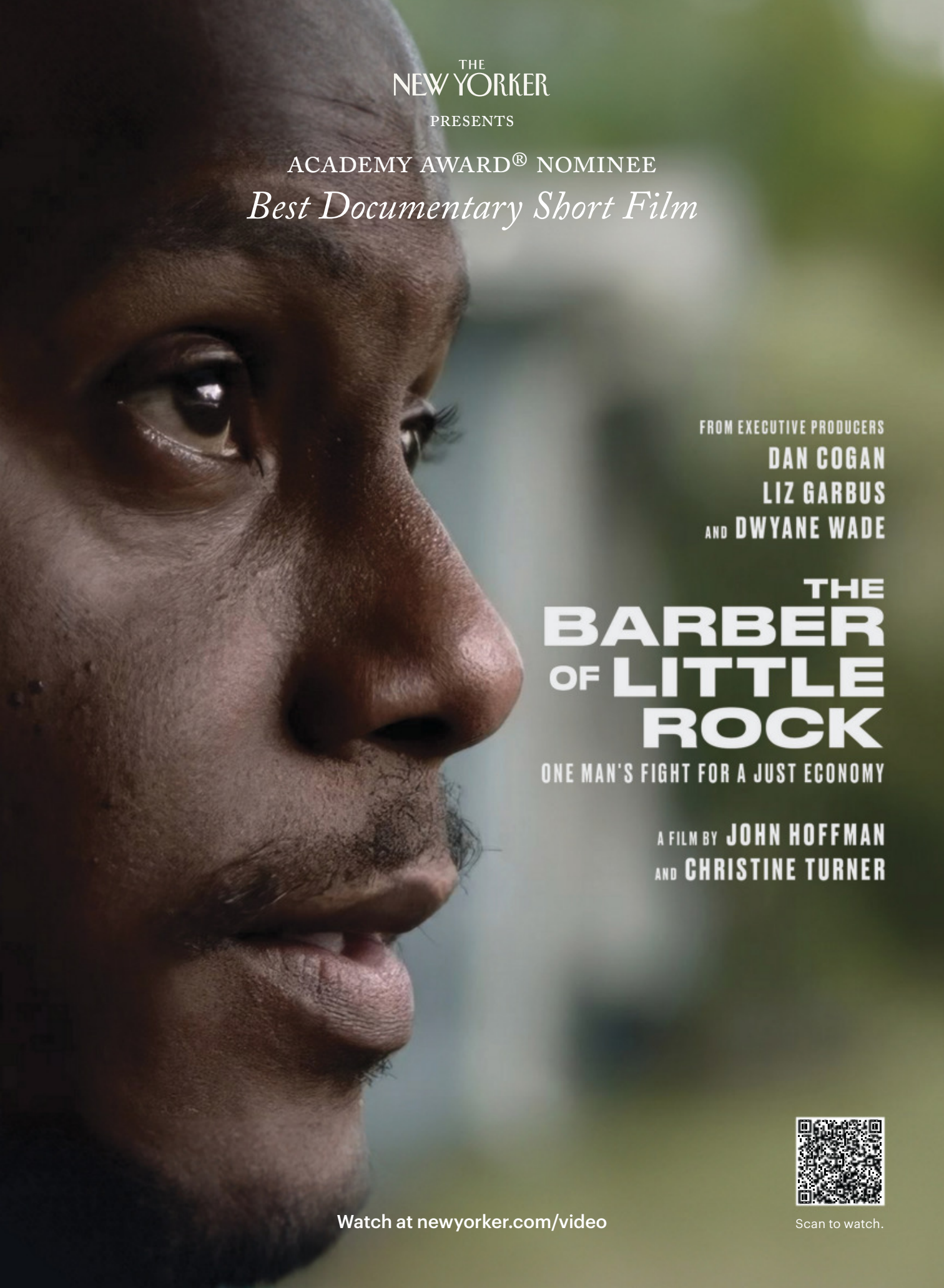
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CONTRIBUTORS

Maggie Shannon (*"Last Resort," p. 62*) is a Los Angeles-based photographer who specializes in portrait and documentary work.

Calvin Tomkins (*"The Art of Change," p. 50*) is a staff writer who has covered art and culture for the magazine since 1960. "The Lives of Artists," a six-volume collection of his Profiles, was published in 2019.

Louisa Thomas (*"No Joke," p. 20*), a staff writer, is the author of three books, including "Louisa: The Extraordinary Life of Mrs. Adams."

Nicholas Konrad (*Cover*) is an art director at *The New Yorker*.

Carrie Fountain (*Poem, p. 79*) is a poet, a novelist, and a children's-book author. Her most recent collection of poems is "The Life."

Jack Handey (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 33*) has written for the magazine since 1987. His latest book is "My Funny Cowboy Dance."

Patrick Radden Keefe (*"The Oligarch's Son," p. 34*), a staff writer, is the author of "Say Nothing" and "Empire of Pain." His latest book is "Rogues."

Mary Gaitskill (*"The Friendship Challenge," p. 26*) has written several novels and short-story collections. Her most recent book is "The Devil's Treasure."

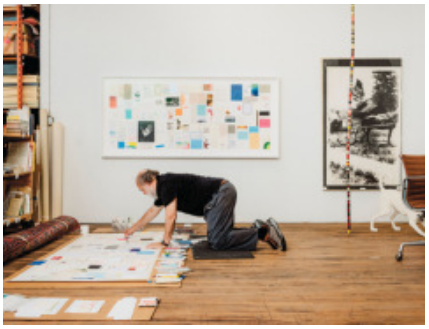
Michael Ondaatje (*Poem, p. 56*) is the author of several books, including "The English Patient" and "Warlight." His latest book of poetry, "A Year of Last Things," will be published in March.

Addie Citchens (*Fiction, p. 74*) has contributed to *The Paris Review* and *The Oxford American*, among others.

Adam Kirsch (*Books, p. 89*) is an editor for the *Wall Street Journal's* weekend Review section and the author of "The Revolt Against Humanity."

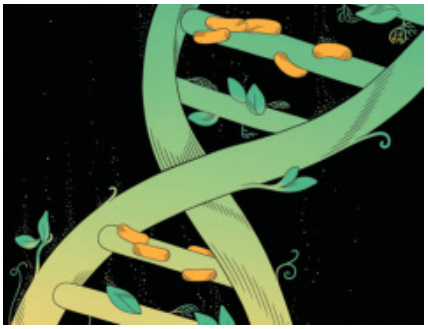
Margaret Talbot (*"Last Resort," p. 62*) has been a staff writer since 2004. Her latest book, with David Talbot, is "By the Light of Burning Dreams."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



PERSONS OF INTEREST

Max Norman profiles Joseph Grigely, an artist who makes disability a doorway to meaning.



ELEMENTS

Matthew Hutson writes about biologists who are trying to engineer crops that fertilize themselves.

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LEFT: LYNDON FRENCH; RIGHT: ALËNA SKARINA

THE MAIL

COMIC PREDECESSORS

It was heartening to read Carrie Battan's Profile of Jacqueline Novak and learn that a comic has found success in standup by focussing on sex from a woman's perspective ("Detail Oriented," January 22nd). But nothing happens in a vacuum, and it would have been nice for either Battan or Novak to give a nod to the many second-wave-feminist comics, both stage performers and writers, who came earlier, so to speak.

Chief among those deserving mention were the numerous contributors to Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely's 1980 collection, "Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire." Of those, none was bolder and funnier than the late Naomi Weisstein, whose account of growing up, "The Saturday Night Special: Rape and Other Big Jokes," remains as outrageously hilarious and thought-provoking as ever.

Margaret D. Stetz
Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies
University of Delaware
Newark, Del.

SEEING ADDICTION CLEARLY

Reading E. Tammy Kim's article about drug-decriminalization efforts in Oregon, I was reminded that addiction treatment is the only area of health care in which we consider saving someone's life to be an unacceptable outcome ("Do No Harm," January 22nd). As a society, we would find it morally repugnant to withhold care from someone with a chronic and life-threatening medical condition simply because they did not adhere completely to their treatment.

Yet, despite all of the evidence that harm-reduction services can help drug users, we continue to debate such programs' merits and resist their implementation on the basis of the false notion that we are "enabling" people's drug habits. After thirty-five years in recovery and a life spent trying to create pathways out of addiction for others, including as the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President Obama, I can only conclude that Americans fundamentally believe that people who suffer from addiction are morally flawed, and somehow don't deserve all the help that we can give them.

Michael Botticelli
Wilton Manors, Fla.

MITCHELL'S GIFT

Louis Menand's piece on the current state of intellectual property, and the field's wide range of rights and gripes, was informative and insightful (A Critic at Large, January 22nd). However, one parenthetical seemed like an unfair characterization.

Menand discusses the copyright-infringement case involving the 2001 retelling of Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" from the perspective of a Black character, in the author Alice Randall's "The Wind Done Gone," and describes "a peculiar outcome," in which Randall's publisher agreed to make a contribution to Morehouse College. He then adds that it was "as though the estate of the author of 'Gone with the Wind' were somehow the party that stood for improving the life chances of Black Americans." In fact, the Mitchell estate's direction of funds to Morehouse more than fifty years after her death was far from peculiar; it was consistent with Mitchell's own financial support of the college, beginning in 1942. The funds that Mitchell donated were earmarked for scholarships, mostly for medical and dental students, owing to Mitchell's concerns about the poor quality of health care then available to Black Americans.

Schaune C. Griffin
Decatur, Ga.

•

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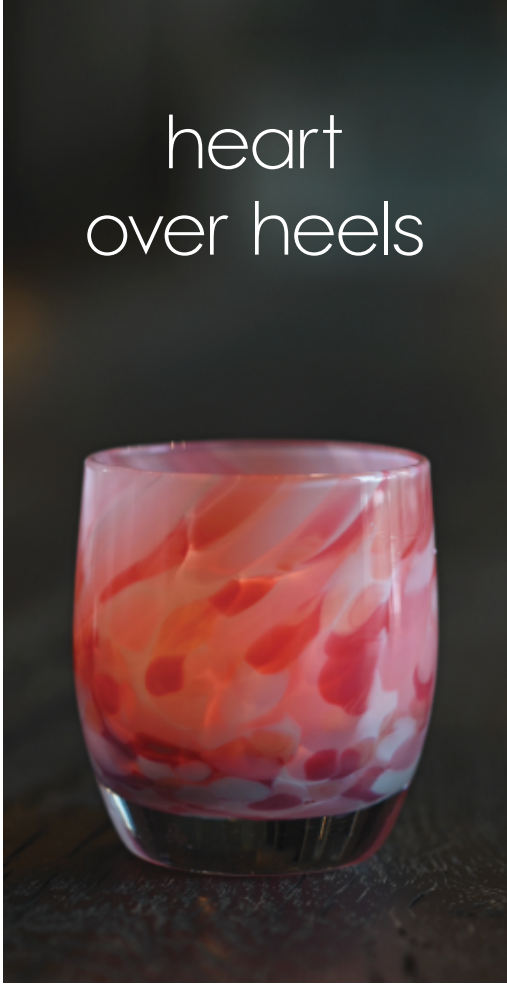

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GOINGS ON

FEBRUARY 7 – 20, 2024

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

David Greenspan, one of downtown theatre's exquisites, performs an entire psychedelic noir narrative in Joey Merlo's **"On Set with Theda Bara,"** a one-person show for many voices. In Merlo's delirious play—staged by the director Jack Serio with the audience seated at a long table in a pitch-dark room—a genderqueer teen is missing, and their detective father is on the case. The gumshoe finds that all roads somehow lead to Theda Bara, the real silent-screen sex symbol, nicknamed "the Vamp" for her iconic roles as a hypnotic, exotic lamia. Greenspan performs all the parts around, and sometimes *on*, the table. The show operates as a séance—phantasmal essences shift in your peripheral vision, and a chill breath finds the back of your neck.—*Helen Shaw (The Brick; Feb. 6–March 9.)*

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTOR LLORENTE

ABOUT TOWN

PODCASTS | In October, 2020, a group of men affiliated with a ragtag Michigan militia, some of whom had attended an armed COVID-lockdown protest at the state capitol that spring, were arrested for plotting to kidnap the governor, Gretchen Whitmer. Because F.B.I. informants had infiltrated the group, befriending the would-be kidnappers, the case yielded an extraordinary amount of secretly recorded audio, which the reporters Ken Bensinger and Jessica Garrison employ expertly in **"Chameleon: The Michigan Plot."** Taking listeners into the heart of the action—often Coen-brothers-esque in its characters' hapless humanity—the series asks if its subjects were credible domestic terrorists or just "hyped-up stoners who talked too much," egged on, unbeknownst to them, by the F.B.I.; the results are as provocative as they are tragicomic.—*Sarah Larson*

CLASSICAL MUSIC | Miller Theatre, a hotbed of musical exploration, at Columbia University, has both ends of the classical spectrum pretty well covered. For its acclaimed "Composer Portraits" series, which seeks out creators of new and unusual sounds, the **International Contemporary Ensemble** taps into the scrambled kineticism of the German composer Carola Bauckholt's work (Feb. 8). On the early-music side, **Gesualdo Six,** an exquisite vocal ensemble specializing in Renaissance polyphony, samples from its haunting and consoling album "Lux Aeterna" (Feb. 17). Miller's "Pop-Up Concerts" invite audiences to be radically present: at free, hourlong programs, listeners are seated onstage for intimate encounters with such music as Beethoven's cello sonatas, played by the adventuresome **Conrad Tao** and **Jay Campbell** (Feb. 13).—*Oussama Zahr (Miller Theatre; select dates Feb. 8–17.)*

R. & B. | When the singer **Tinashe** broke through with her club-focussed 2014 single, "2 On," it seemed as if her aspirations to be a major-label pop star were within her grasp. In 2011, after her girl group the Stunners disbanded, she had carved out space for herself with a series of wondrous, wispy alt-R. & B. mixtapes, which won the attention of RCA Records. When that stardom never materialized, through a three-album run that gradually strayed from her early music's astral allures, she returned to charting her own path. The records that Tinashe has released since, independently—"Songs For You" (2019), "333" (2021), and "BB/ANG3L" (2023), each more unconventional than the last—showcase an artist who is at her most comfortable, and experimental, working beyond the industry pale.—*Sheldon Pearce (Terminal 5; Feb. 9.)*

OFF BROADWAY | Max Wolf Friedlich's play **"Job"** opens point-blank, with a young woman aiming a gun at her therapist. He talks her into putting it away, but our awareness of it never disappears, even amid the frequently funny dialogue that follows. The woman, Jane (a terrifyingly unpredictable Sydney Lemmon), is on leave from her job at a big-name tech company after a disruptive panic attack; she's come to the therapist (a comfortingly genial Peter Friedman) for a psychological evaluation, which she needs in order to return to work. Yes, the situation is absurd, but thanks to the playwright, the performers, and the director Michael Herwitz—a master of unsettling effects—it's also engrossing and disturbing, especially as the nature of Jane's work emerges. It might even scare you off social media for a day or two.—*Dan Stahl (Connelly Theatre; through March 3.)*

MOVIES | Oscars may matter in the movie business for the short term, but the history of cinema advances without regard to the statuettes, as displayed in the teeming six-week series **"Snubbed 2: The Performances."** It spotlights movies featuring widely acclaimed performances that went unnominated, such as Pam Grier's tough-minded and dialectically deft title role in Quentin Tarantino's "Jackie Brown"; Charles Grodin's brilliant comedic turn as a near-schlub who achieves self-liberation through insincerity and deceit in Elaine May's "The Heartbreak Kid"; and Gena Rowlands's star performance in John Cassavetes's "Opening Night," one of the great movies about the emotional toll of acting, as an actress preparing for a play, who—fearing that her own aging is being exploited by the elderly playwright—transforms the work by means of furious improvisations.—*Richard Brody (Museum of the Moving Image; through March 10.)*

DANCE | After nearly sixty years of making dances, **Twyla Tharp** shows no signs of stopping. Recent programs have featured burnished classics along with some revelatory back-of-the-drawer stuff, but she's been creating new works, too. If these have been less inspired, still, it would be a mistake to assume that her best is all in the past, and she continues to draw extra effort from both the veterans and the up-and-coming dancers in her pickup troupes. Her latest program introduces "The Ballet Master," an ensemble piece set to Vivaldi, and "Brel," a solo set to Jacques Brel. How might her take on that mid-century sardonic-romantic Belgian bounce off a revival of "Ocean's Motion," her 1975 treatment of Chuck Berry tracks?—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 13–25.)*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Border Town at the Screen Door
145 Driggs Ave., Brooklyn

I think of myself as a morning person, but I still groaned and grumbled as I rolled out of bed before sunrise recently just to get breakfast. My destination was the Screen Door, a tiny ice-cream shop in Brooklyn's Greenpoint that is currently hosting Border Town, a peripatetic breakfast-taco pop-up. A friend had advised me to get there at eight o'clock on the dot, the moment the door opens, to insure that I absolutely, without fail, would be guaranteed a taste of the chef Jorge Aguilar's *frijoles* taco, a modest smear of refried beans and a bit of melted cheese on a blistery-fresh flour tortilla, which tends to sell out fast.

Some beans are worth waking up for. Aguilar's *frijoles refritos* are made with pinto beans and lard in a two-day process; the result is rich and savory, earthy and sweet. But the real showstopper is the tortilla, made with lard and ultra-soft Mexican Bonfil flour, which Aguilar rolls out fresh as the orders come in. This takes time—Border Town is not fast food—but your tortilla will be so chewy, so tender, so rich and fresh and steamy, that you won't mind the wait.

Aguilar—who operates Border Town with Amanda Rosa, his partner in business and in life—grew up back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico, in Calexico-Mexicali, an agglomeration of two cities which straddles the border. For his simple, almost minimalist *tacos de guisado*, which are popular throughout Mexico but rare in New York City, some *guisado*, a braise or stew, is rolled up into tacos that are floppy and chewy. My favorites of those I've tried (Border Town offers three varieties per day) include egg and potato; *chile colorado* (pork shoulder slow-braised with mild chilies); *chicharrón* (fried pork skin) stewed in a red-pepper sauce; and a velvety potato filling spiced with a bit of chorizo.

Aguilar and Rosa told me that their goal is to turn Border Town into a brick-and-mortar. For now, they're at the Screen Door Thursdays to Saturdays, through March, and also at Commune, the Clinton Hill coffee shop, on Sundays. When I asked Aguilar about the *tacos de guisado* he grew up eating, he described how, when he lived on the U.S. side of the border, he would ask friends who lived in Mexico and worked in California to bring him tacos for lunch. "They used to get in line to cross over around five in the morning," he said, "and I wouldn't eat the tacos until noon. Those tacos were like heaven to me." I devised a test: at the shop, I scarfed down one potato-and-chorizo taco immediately (delicious), and I took another home. An hour later, the taco, having steamed in its foil, was warm and yielding, and the flavors—the flour and the char, the faint and sweet minerality of the potato, the spice and fat of the chorizo—all blurred together, a perfect harmonic chord. *(Tacos $5.)*

—Helen Rosner

PICK THREE

The staff writer Hua Hsu shares current obsessions.

1. I take great comfort in the music of **Theo Parrish,** a Chicago-raised, Detroit-based d.j. and producer who specializes in a soulful, slow-burning, occasionally off-kilter approach to house. When I'm unable to decide what to listen to, I'll put on one of his mixes, many of which are drawn from gigs that can stretch to ten hours. You'll hear a bit of everything—even the skip of an old record—and your life will be better for it. The latest issue of *Blank Forms*, from the arts organization of the same name, features a nearly two-hundred-page interview with him, by the music writer Mike Rubin, in which Parrish muses on creativity, Blackness, and why listening to the pops on old records reminds us of our own imperfections.

2. There's an every-now-and-then party in Bushwick, in Brooklyn, called **Musicland**—you can find them on Instagram. Once there, leave your phone in your pocket. It starts late and ends early in the morning, and you will dance among plants, old records, and exceedingly friendly strangers, to some of the city's best d.j.s. Musicland parties draw a slightly older crowd than the warehouse raves a few blocks away; imagine a tiny, warm, inviting house party. Step inside for a few hours of shelter and community—you will lose and then find yourself.

3. On view at the Eric Firestone gallery, in NoHo, is **"Godzilla: Echoes from the 1990s Asian American Arts Network."** Curated by Jennifer Samet, it explores the legacy of the visionary, come-as-you-are group of Asian American artists whose work collectively stress-tested what this shared category could mean.

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THE NEW YORKER

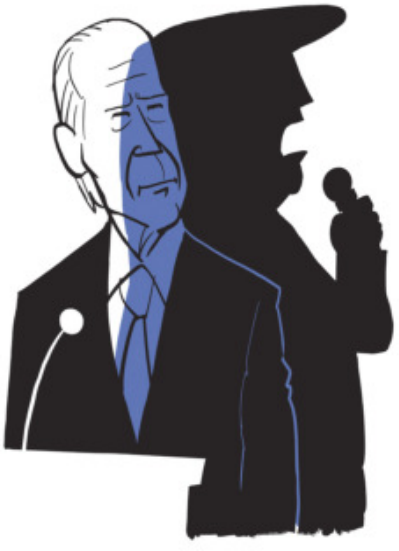
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
QUIET PARTS

Everything about Joe Biden's reëlection effort tends to be pretty quiet, and so it was with a characteristic mutedness that the campaign greeted its best week in a long time. Much of the good news had to do with the economy, as the stock market broke records and prices have come under control. "The war on inflation is over. We won," Paul Krugman, the Nobel economics laureate, had declared. Donald Trump has been attacking the economy's performance since his reluctant departure from office, and so, when he tried to take credit for it last week, it seemed a good gauge of how much the wind is shifting. "THIS IS THE TRUMP STOCK MARKET," he wrote on Truth Social, "BECAUSE MY POLLS AGAINST BIDEN ARE SO GOOD THAT INVESTORS ARE PROJECTING THAT I WILL WIN, AND THAT WILL DRIVE THE MARKET UP."

Election campaigns are competitive enterprises, not just consumer-sentiment thermometers, so the more important developments for Team Biden concern Trump himself (and maybe his comeuppance for other poorly thought-through things he's written on Truth Social). Just three days after he won the New Hampshire primary, a New York jury ordered him to pay eighty-three million dollars for defaming E. Jean Carroll, whom he had previously been found liable for sexually abusing. Criminal trials await, and nearly a quarter of Trump supporters say they won't vote for him if he is convicted. ("Reason #50,000,000 Trump Won't Beat Biden: His PAC Spent $50M on Legal Fees," as the Nikki Haley campaign put it.) Trump wasted his victory speech in New Hampshire with a sour rant about Haley, after which she dug in deeper. In his courtroom appearances and in his efforts to persuade the anti-Trump holdouts in the G.O.P. to give up the Haley dream, he now finds himself in environments where his demeanor works against him. So do his supporters, who last week declared war on Taylor Swift.

Run the numbers, as the election year begins, and life in this country looks to be getting less bleak, more studded with possibility. In 2022, the U.S. recovered all the jobs lost during the pandemic. In the year since, unemployment has stayed below four per cent, and the economy is now performing more strongly than that of every other wealthy nation, including China. Gaps that had seemed permanently wide began to close. The post-pandemic recovery reversed about a quarter of the growth in wage inequality that had taken place in the previous four decades, and the wealth of Black and Hispanic families grew by sixty-one per cent and forty-seven per cent, respectively, between 2019 and 2022, significantly outpacing the thirty-one-per-cent increase for white families. Major, unprecedented bills became law—the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act—committing the country to an expansive building program, much of it in beleaguered regions, designed to accelerate the green transition. The progress isn't all linear—we are producing an immense amount of gas and oil. But scan the country and you will catch glimpses of what might be an extraordinary transformation. In South Dakota, of all places, eighty-four per cent of in-state electricity is now generated by renewable resources.



Poll Americans, though, and the dissatisfaction with the current regime is profound. A few polls have shown Biden ahead of Trump (last week, Quinnipiac had him up fifty per cent to forty-four nationally), but many align with Bloomberg's latest, which shows that voters prefer Trump in every swing state and trust him to better handle the economy by a wide margin. Only twenty-nine per cent in the same survey say that the country is on the right track. How can this be? Theories abound. Even if inflation is in retreat, prices for gas, groceries, and rent are still much higher than they've been in recent memory, and so it may be some time before people believe that the economy is as strong

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

as the numbers indicate. The news has focussed on the flood of migrants at the southern border, and on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, which can suggest instability and unease. And some who think that the country is on the wrong track are liberals, who see in Trump's continued strength, and in the Supreme Court's reversal of reproductive rights, strong evidence that America is still defined by its reactionary turn. The country has been rife with inequality for a long time, and many may doubt that general gains will do much for them. People have earned their cynicism.

For Biden and his campaign staff, the problem is tactical. How can he pull this off? There is no shortage of advice. The easiest path might be to run as Democrats have done successfully in every election after 2016: against Trump's assault on democracy and social values, and against his movement's extremism on gender and abortion, which has given Biden's party a huge advantage among women. The strategist Simon Rosenberg advised keeping it simple: "Democrats are going to save the country. Republicans are dangerous." He added, "Since Trump unveiled himself as MAGA in the 2017-2018 cycle, we just keep winning elections. We won the 2018 cycle. We won the 2020 cycle. We won in ways that people never thought we would in 2022."

That's true, mostly: the Democrats lost the House in 2022, and 2020 was a nail-biter. Joel Benenson, who helped steer both Barack Obama's and Hillary Clinton's Presidential bids, recently suggested taking the opposite approach. He said, "One thing Mr. Biden should stop talking about: Mr. Trump"—adding that the charges Trump faces are, by themselves, cause for alarm among the general public. Elections are about the future rather than the past, he noted, and urged Biden to make this one "a forward-looking choice built on a contrast of economic vision and values."

Yet a funny feature of this campaign is that, since both candidates are unpopular, Biden is hoping (as his aides have told reporters) to let Trump have center stage, so that voters might be reminded how much they despise him. A seeming consequence, though, is that it has left Biden saying how essential this election is, but saying so quietly. His democracy-themed kickoff speech near Valley Forge drew respectful but limited coverage, relative to the spectacle of Trump's feud with Haley. On one level, the choice that Biden faces seems profound: make this election about the nation's continuing progress under his Administration, or about the destructive potential of a second Trump term. But he probably needs to do both—a little bit about the future, a little bit about the past. That will require turning up the volume.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

AIRFLOW DEPT.

WHISTLER

There is not yet an Academy Award for Best Whistling, but, if there were, Molly Lewis would be a shoo-in. Lewis, who is thirty-three, is a professional whistler. Her mellifluous sound, spanning two octaves, is part Snow White communing with the birds, part haunted theremin. Millions of people have heard her whistle, whether they know it or not, thanks to her latest credit, on "Barbie." During the scene in which Barbie meets her creator, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman), in an enchanted kitchen at Mattel headquarters, an instrumental version of Billie Eilish's Oscar-nominated song "What Was I Made For?" plays on a radio, with Lewis whistling the melody. It replays over the credits; the final sound in the film is that of air passing through her lips.

"I've been blessed by the whistle gods," Lewis said the other day, over tacos in Brooklyn. She had her strawberry-blond hair in bangs, clipped with a barrette, and wore a black sweater. Her musical taste, like her look, is retro-jazzy. "Whistling can be associated with anything happy and jingly and jolly," she said. "The music I love is a little bit sad or ambiguous." She hosts a sultry lounge act in L.A., called Café Molly, and this month releases her début LP, "On the Lips," which comes with instructions advising the listener to play it with mood lighting, ideally while splayed on a chaise longue, in velvet, silk, or the nude.

Lewis grew up in Australia and Los Angeles. Her father, Mark Lewis, makes documentaries about animals. "Cane Toads: An Unnatural History," a film of his from 1988, is "quite famous in Australia," Lewis noted. (A sequel, "Cane Toads: The Conquest," came out in 2010.) Lewis learned to whistle when she was four. "I remember finally making a sound and being quite pleased with myself," she recalled. For her birthday one year, her parents gave her a CD of Steve (The Whistler) Herbst whistling Broadway covers, and she realized that she could whistle along. She taught herself how to make a sound breathing in as well as out, so that she could whistle uninterrupted. When she was a teen-ager, her parents showed her the documentary "Pucker Up," about the International Whistlers Convention, in Louisburg, North Carolina. "My dad told me, 'If you ever get into that competition, I'll take you there.'"

In 2012, Lewis was twenty-two and living in Berlin when she got into the contest, so her father brought her to North Carolina. She sang the Queen of the Night aria ("which I found out later is kind of a clichéd choice for whistlers") and Patsy Cline's "Crazy," and won a plaque for "Whistler Who Traveled the Greatest Distance." A few years later, she moved back to L.A. to work in film, and some artist friends who knew about her "sordid whistling past" asked her to perform at galleries. When the Italian musician Alessandro Alessandroni ("one of my whistling heroes")

Molly Lewis

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died, in 2017, Lewis staged a tribute evening, which led to more gigs, from Mexico City to Shanghai. She has duetted with Karen O, of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, on a verse of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," at a Harry Dean Stanton tribute; done session work on an album produced by Dr. Dre; and performed in a lingerie fashion show on the steps of the Palais Garnier, encircled by BMX bikers. Last spring, Mark Ronson summoned her to New York, to record the "Barbie" track. "For a long time, I kind of felt weird about saying I was a whistler," she said. "But it's what I do now."

She walked around the corner, to Brooklyn Music School. Through a parent she knew, she'd agreed to give a lesson. "I'm a little nervous," she said, heading into a classroom strewn with Tubano drums and Loog guitars. Eleven children, ages five to ten, sat on a carpet. "I'm a whistler," Lewis told them. "That's my instrument. Do any of you guys know how to whistle?" Three hands went up.

"My dad taught me how to whistle for my dog," a boy in a gray hoodie bragged, and demonstrated.

"That's great!" Lewis said. She took a request—"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"—and accompanied herself on guitar. After a quick tutorial (Lauren Bacall said it best: "You just put your lips together and blow"), the kids tried it out, with varying success. "I talk to birds sometimes," Lewis told them. "I say hello to them, and they say hi back."

Any questions? "Do you lick your lips when you whistle?" a girl sucking a lollipop asked. (No, but "a whistler should always have ChapStick on them," Lewis advised.) Did she do any Ed Sheeran songs? (Nope.) How does she practice? "Well, this is another thing I like about whistling," Lewis said. "You can do it while you're just walking down the street!"

"You may not be able to whistle underwater," a girl observed.

"That is one place that I can't do it, unfortunately."

A boy asked, "What about while you're scuba diving?"

Lewis smiled. "I would love to try."

—Michael Schulman

HUNGRY MAN DEPT.
AROUND THE WORLD

Ever since Delmonico's, believed by many to be the nation's first restaurant, opened its doors on Beaver Street, in 1837, finding something new in New York's dining scene has been a challenge. (In the eighteen-seventies, however, customers at Caffè Moretti, on Cedar Street, were baffled by how to eat its signature dish: spaghetti.) Few people understand the challenge as well as Andy Doro, a forty-one-year-old Brooklyn financial adviser, who is on a quest to eat a meal from every country in the world without leaving the five boroughs.

On a recent Thursday, he joined his old Stuyvesant High School buddy Mark Maher and Mark's husband, Lou, for dinner at Maloya, a new place in Bushwick that serves food from Réunion, a former French island colony east of Madagascar. It marked the hundred-and-fiftieth notch in Doro's tally. (He has acknowledged some places—Hong Kong, Kosovo, Macau, Palestine, Puerto Rico, Taiwan—not universally recognized as countries which have their own food cultures.)

"You have to be quick," he said. "I went to a Nicaraguan spot around here on opening night and it closed a few months later. In 2020, there was a woman from Chad running a restaurant in the East Village for just a few weeks." He is still haunted by the Togolese restaurant in the Bronx that closed before he could eat there, the shuttered Brooklyn bodega that promised Macedonian candy, and the Surinamese street vender who moved to Trenton before Doro could try his jerk pork.

As Doro, who wore a navy shirt, was seated by one of Maloya's owners, Samuel Lebreton, he explained that he had prepped for the evening by watching "Mississippi Mermaid," Truffaut's 1969 crime drama set on the island.

Lebreton brought out a flight of infused rums, lined up in French alphabetical order: *ananas-massalé*, *gingembre-combava*, *mangue caramélisée*, and *orange-cannelle*. Doro ordered every appetizer on the menu: four kinds of samosa, barbecue chicken, cod fritters, and spicy lima-bean fritters.

"I love this," he said, with his mouth full of *aligot* samosa. "It reminds me of *mămăligă*, a polenta thing I loved at a Moldovan restaurant in Sunnyside."

When they were in their twenties, Doro and Maher biked around the city—Brownsville, Canarsie, City Island—trying far-flung restaurants, including one promising "the best Haitian food in the city." "I remember that being terrible," Maher said.

"Yeah, they fried the shit out of everything," Doro said. (He preferred Le Soleil, one of the last surviving remnants of Bois Verna, the old Haitian neighborhood near Columbus Circle.)

Doro's formal quest began in April,

"I'm beginning to wonder if we're actually birds of a feather, Larry."

EVERY CHOICE OF BAGEL AVAILABLE ON 8TH AVENUE, NEW YORK

PLAIN WITH HONEY PECAN CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH CINNAMON CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH PUMPKIN CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH BLUEBERRY CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH ESPRESSO CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH GARLIC AND HERBS CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH TOFU SCALLION CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH SRIRACHA BACON SCALLION CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH CUCUMBER DILL CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH VEGGIE CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH BACON CHEDDAR CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH JALAPENO CHEDDAR CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH CHIPOTLE CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH SUNDRIED TOMATO AND ROASTED GARLIC CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH STRAWBERRY CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH OLIVE CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH DIABLO CHIPOTLE CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH JALAPENO CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH LOX CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH HONEY BACON SRIRACHA CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH LOW FAT CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH APPLE CINNAMON CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH TOFU CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH TOFU ARTICHOKE SPINACH CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH TOFU OLIVE CREAM CHEESE, PLAIN WITH COOKIE MONSTER (IT'S BLUE) CREAM 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2016, after a meal of Egyptian *sayadia* and rabbit *molokhia* at Mombar, in Astoria. "I was disgusted at the rise of Donald Trump's anti-immigrant Presidential campaign and the casual xenophobia it revealed nationwide, even among New Yorkers," he said. "So I wanted to show how integral immigration is." He thought of his mother, too, who emigrated from Taiwan at fifteen.

He quickly racked up a hundred nations, sometimes collecting three or four a day. He chronicled the visits on Instagram and then on his Web site, everycountryfoodnyc.com. But in the past five years his pace has slowed. Mauritania (No. 120) made the list in September, 2018; Libya (No. 130), that December. He hit No. 140 (Liberia) in September, 2019, and No. 145 (Belize) in April, 2021. South Sudan was No. 149, in April, 2023. He reckons that once he hits No. 193 (the current United Nations membership) he'll reassess what's left.

At Maloya, more courses arrived: a salad of mango, goat cheese, pickled onions, and watercress; bœuf bourguignon; a pork-sausage ragù; and poached swordfish with tamarind. The hit was vanilla shrimp.

"My favorite places sell one thing," Doro said. "Like this Hainan chicken place in Elmhurst." He has had plenty of happy surprises. Dominican *pelau* at the Queens Night Market turned out to be from Dominica, not the Dominican Republic (Nos. 146 and 10, respectively). He happened upon a Malagasy food truck (No. 126) near Columbia University. He enjoyed a short-lived Dungan-run restaurant serving Kazakh fare (No. 118) in Sheepshead Bay. There was Icelandic (No. 90) fish and chips in Greenwich Village, a Latvian (No. 137) Christmas feast in the Bronx, and a Liberian (No. 140) festival in Park Hill, Staten Island. His weakest entry, he confessed, is Vatican City (No. 84): he bought a pouch of *salfiore di romagna* (known as "the Pope's salt") at Eataly.

At Maloya, over a dessert of corn cake with ginger ice cream, Doro talked about his holy grails. "Central African food is tough," he said. He'd been hopeful when he read about a Pan-African pop-up in Chelsea, but it was cancelled.

Having checked off Réunion, Doro moved on to the Gambia. He'd found a Gambian woman in the Bronx who sells meals online, and he ordered fish *yassa*, *dibi* grilled meat, and sorrel juice. But minutes before they were supposed to meet, at the Jay Street subway station, she texted that she had an emergency and couldn't make it.

"New York is a place of so many possibilities," Doro said a few days later, over a bowl of bull-penis-and-testicle soup at Naks, a new Filipino restaurant in the East Village. "But you can't believe anything until it's in your hands."

—*Richard Morgan*

NOISE DEPT.

MASHUP

"Illinoise" is a dance-theatrical take on the Sufjan Stevens album "Illinois," which may or may not be pronounced "Ill-uh-noise," and is about Illinois, which is not. "A lot of fans are certain the album is called 'Illinoise,'" the show's director and choreographer, Justin Peck, said the other day. "The reality is that it's called 'Illinois.'" Peck and the production wanted to distinguish the show from the album; the "e" felt right. So that's what they named it.

But how should they describe it? It's not quite a musical, a ballet, or a play, but it's close. It's a collaboration between three big-deal artists—a supergroup, basically, like boygenius, but for theatre. Stevens, of course, provided the music, and Peck the dance; at thirty-six, he's been the resident choreographer at New York City Ballet for a decade. (He recently choreographed "Maestro" and Spielberg's "West Side Story.") For the narrative, they enlisted the playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury, who won a Pulitzer for "Fairview."

Last month, the crew was packing up the props and wardrobe for a three-week run in Chicago. They were in a studio in the Park Avenue Armory, where the show will make its New York City début, in early March. Peck was wearing glasses and a sweater with a big "K" on the front. Drury, wearing a crinkly quilted-cotton sweater, was saying goodbye to some dancers. "They have to go do another rehearsal," she said. "I'm going to keep it mysterious. But it's a clown school."

In the middle of the room, sneakers—Reeboks, Nikes—that had been resoled with suède were being packed into bags. Drury held up a shoe to show the slippery bottom. "It's so they can do all the spinny spinny dancy dancy, which is very beautiful," she said. "Just to be very clear, I'm not dancing. I think of myself as, like, the sixth understudy, but no one else does."

The idea for the show had been Peck's. He'd first heard "Illinois," Stevens's orchestral-folk-pop epic from 2005, as a teen-ager. "I was, like, This person can write music for dance, music for theatre, and music for orchestra. That's so rare to find," Peck said. He later sent Stevens a letter, hoping to collaborate on a ballet. "I was just some punk kid," he said. He never heard back.

They ended up meeting years later. "Jessica Dessner introduced us," Peck said. "She's a dancer, and, like, Sufjan's best friend." (Her brothers, Aaron and Bryce, formed the band the National.) Stevens wasn't a ballet fan, but Dessner had persuaded him to attend one of Peck's shows. Afterward, they all got dinner. Peck and Stevens wound up making several ballets together. (Peck also made one based on Stevens's album about the B.Q.E.) They became friends, too: Chinese food on Christmas and bike rides around the city, back when Stevens lived in town. "He never slowed down or stopped for red lights," Peck said. "I've never been more scared for my life."

Drury winced. "You need elbow pads *and* kneepads," she said.

Peck went on, "After, like, five years of us working together, I asked Sufjan, 'Did you ever get that letter?' He was, like, 'I did get that letter. And, truthfully, I thought, Who's this little punk?'"

At the Armory, Peck was bouncing in place—quasi-pliés. Dancy dancy. Drury said, "So much of this comes from you and your relationship to the album and to Sufjan. For me, I feel like my role is almost like cheerleading."

"It's more than that!" Peck said. After a moment, he added, "Sometimes you need a buddy."

It took Peck five years of pestering to get Stevens's blessing for "Illinoise." The pianist Timo Andres did the musical arrangement; Stevens didn't want to get too involved. Instead of a script, Peck and Drury came up with a story, which has no dialogue. The narrative is arranged

Jackie Sibblies Drury and Justin Peck

around a camping scene. In the rehearsal room, old metal lanterns were everywhere.

Genre-wise, the show is unconventional. They had some inspirations. Peck liked "Movin' Out," Twyla Tharp's Billy Joel jukebox musical. "I used to sneak into the second act," he said. "I was probably at the age when I wrote to Sufjan."

"We talk a little bit about 'A Chorus Line,'" Drury said. "But it's not the same, either."

Drury had been a Stevens fan herself. "Illinois" came out around the time she was moving to Chicago with her boyfriend. "I was sort of deciding if this was going to be a serious relationship or not," she said. "So I moved to Chicago and we played 'Chicago' in the U-Haul, which is very cheesy." They're married now.

"Illinois" had followed an earlier album called "Michigan," and Stevens pledged to keep going. "Everyone freaked out," Peck said. " 'Fifty albums of all the states!' He was joking."

"Justin's going to do fifty dance-theatre performances," Drury said. "We're just waiting for 'Alaska.'"

—Zach Helfand

THE PICTURES
PARTY TOWN

The writer-director Molly Manning Walker perched on a stool at the Bushwick bar Mood Ring the other night, trying to talk her way out of doing karaoke. "I'm not a singer," she said, apologetically, after the bartender encouraged her to make an attempt. "I'm pretty tone-deaf." Growing up in London, in the two-thousands, she'd filmed her brother's punk band from the pit; finding a way to get involved without playing an instrument, she said, had been a matter of urgency: "I was, like, 'Fuck, give me a camera, quick!'"

The camera worked out. Manning Walker shot music videos for such artists as A$AP Rocky, became the cinematographer for the Sundance award winner "Scrapper," and, last year, won the Un Certain Regard prize at Cannes for her début feature, "How to Have Sex." The film, which opened last week, follows a trio of British girls through a Dionysian rite of passage: the post-exams holiday. In 2010, Manning Walker took hers in the Majorcan town of Magaluf; she went back years later to conduct research for the movie, this time taking notes on her nights out. "I was constantly writing down what people were saying," she recalled. The plot, ultimately set in Crete, tracks the complicated bonds between teens—shaped by petty jealousies, easy intimacy, and try-hard posturing—at a pivotal moment.

Manning Walker, now thirty, has short, bleached-blond hair and a low-key geniality. She shot "How to Have Sex" during the winter, when tourists flee Crete for warmer climes. The all-important club scenes required hundreds of extras ("We had *buses* of teen-agers coming in from all over the island"), and she found herself having to coax her freezing leading lady, Mia McKenna-Bruce, back into the pool for additional takes. The team built camaraderie through soccer matches, barbecues, and sing-alongs. "The whole film was meant to be designed in two halves," Manning Walker said. "The first part is like Disneyland—fun, all the colors are quite clean and not messy. And then, slowly, it disintegrates."

She'd experienced this darker side of the scene herself. When she was in her teens, she was assaulted on a night out in London. "I was really affected by it, but also confused as to why no one wanted to speak about it," she said. She turned the incident into a short film and stopped drinking for six years. ("I was still partying," she clarified, "but it made me stop going to parties that were bad.") Sobriety and distance put things in perspective. "I went to a wedding with a bunch of mates, and I was, like, Remember in Magaluf when we were on a bar crawl and they called two guys onstage and they got blow jobs?" Everyone did. "I was, like, *Ohhh*—I kind of thought I'd heightened that in my head." Shooting the movie, she said, "redefined that space for me—going back to the party town and being in control of how I was living within it."

Although "How to Have Sex" grapples with questions of consent—and has sparked debate at post-screening Q.&A.s—it's neither moralistic nor grim. On the festival circuit, Manning Walker and her crew have become known for their commitment to carousing. "I guess it's a good reputation to have," she said. "I love the dance floor, especially for industry parties, because then you avoid the chat. 'I'll be by the speakers if anyone needs me!'"

A group of friends entered Mood Ring, and the bartender perked up: more potential singers. Manning Walker talked about her next project. She'd just finished a treatment for a film that deals with climate change. "I'm really interested in the decisions we're making as human beings while the world is on fire," she said. "I'm amazed that everyone is, like, *doo-doo-doo-doo-doo*, while in the background—" she mimed the sound of an explosion. She confided another dream: "I'd like to do big car crashes. Stunts! I want to do an action film! My agent keeps being, like, Stop *saying* that."

The bartender made one last plea: "We're doing karaoke—it doesn't cost anything. Chill vibes! Judgment-free zone!" Finally, a man stood. "She's going to pick something for me," he said, gesturing to his companion. A Bad Bunny song started, and the guy struggled gamely to rap in Spanish.

Manning Walker turned her attention to the pair, with an anthropological glint. "First date or second date?" she whispered. "I think first." The performance wasn't going well, but the woman clapped to the beat in a show of support. Manning Walker revised her estimate: "O.K., maybe it's the third." She watched as the would-be boyfriend returned to his seat, sheepish but triumphant. She grinned and said, "It's quite a good scene, to be fair."

—Alex Barasch

THE *SPORTING SCENE*

NO JOKE

Somehow, Nikola Jokić has become the world's best basketball player.

BY LOUISA THOMAS

In June, as the last seconds of the N.B.A. Finals ticked off the clock and the victorious Denver Nuggets began to celebrate, the team's star, Nikola Jokić, stood by himself. He shook hands with members of the defeated Miami Heat, pulling them close, cradling their heads with his enormous palms. He clapped a few times, rhythmically, with the crowd. Bruises were blooming on the backs of his pale arms; confetti fluttered around his shoulders. His prominent nose, which goes a reddish pink during games, returned to its normal color. Someone handed him a towel, and he wiped the sweat off his face. Then the ESPN reporter Lisa Salters approached him for a postgame interview. Jokić is nearly seven feet tall, and he had to crane his neck to hear her.

"Nikola," she began, and he nodded, as if to confirm that this was, in fact, his name. "They didn't go away," she said, talking about the Heat. "You had to take it." Jokić praised his opponents, then admitted that it had been an ugly game. Although he had scored with ease, in his inimitable, gape-mouthed way, the Nuggets had missed more shots than usual, relying, atypically, on their defense to pull them through. "That's why basketball is a fun sport, you know," he continued. "It's a live thing. You cannot say, 'Oh, *this* is going to happen.'" It was a truism—sports are unpredictable—but also a distillation of his peculiar genius. Jokić, one of the most daring and original players that basketball has ever seen, makes the game seem at once logical and chancy, in the way of living things. On the court, he and his teammates become a single organism; he is its brain. "I think he has the mind of all five positions," the Nuggets assistant coach David Adelman said, last spring.

Traditionally, a basketball team is organized into discrete parts. The tallest man fights for control near the rim, waiting to be fed passes for close-range baskets. Guards and wings fly around the perimeter of play, dribbling, passing, taking longer shots. Jokić can do all these things. He can also take the ball on a handoff outside the three-point arc, drive toward the basket, and, while misrouting defenders with his eyes, sling the ball across the floor to a player who has materialized in the corner. He can grab a defensive rebound with one hand and, in the same motion, throw an overhand pass to a player racing toward the basket on the other end of the court. He knows where his teammates are going to be before they arrive, and he sends the ball there to meet them.

In the past two decades, the N.B.A. has implemented rules limiting certain defensive tactics; coaches, meanwhile, have become savvier about which shots lead to the most points, and how best to generate them. The game has grown faster, and the players have spread out to cover more of the court—the words of the day are "pace" and "space." Basketball commentators also talk about "reading the floor," which is shorthand

REDUX

Some Denver fans refer to the day that Jokić became their team's starting center as "Jokmas," and celebrate it every year.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WILLIAMS

for the act of decoding the shifting patterns formed by moving players and coördinating a joint action in response.

Jokić is a master of this new geometry. "He sees plays before they happen," LeBron James said, after the Nuggets swept the Lakers in the Western Conference Finals. (James accurately noted that he does, too.) More than once, in a big moment, Jokić has recognized an elaborate play that the other team is about to run, based on the arrangement of its players, then quickly instructed his teammates on how to break it up. And he is endlessly adaptable. In the opening game of the finals, he attempted few shots in the first half but had ten assists, and the Nuggets had a seventeen-point lead. By the end of the game, an easy win for Denver, he had twenty-seven points. Jokić's movements are not silky, exactly—his shooting form is more sea lion than Steph Curry—and yet he plays the way water moves across rocks, finding the path of least resistance, even when that path is hard for others to see.

It's glorious to watch. It is also, seemingly, hard to market. Since Michael Jordan retired, for a second time, in the late nineties, a handful of stars have been deemed the world's greatest basketball player. Of these, Jokić is certainly the least famous. Basketball is a sport, but the N.B.A. is a business, orbited by other businesses—some of which, these days, are individual players, who refer to themselves unself-consciously as brands. Jokić isn't on social media; he has called it a waste of time. And, though he is noticeably affectionate with his teammates, he seems to prefer the company of horses. ("I like the smell of them," he has said. "The best feeling ever is when you feed them.") When I e-mailed Jokić's Serbian agent, Miško Ražnatović, a former pro who has helped bring a number of Eastern European players to the N.B.A., and asked about interviewing his client, I got a one-sentence reply: "He doesn't speak with media." Jokić, like all N.B.A. players, is required by the league to make himself available to reporters after games, but otherwise this is true. Jokić recently gave a rare one-on-one interview—to a teammate, Michael Porter, Jr., who has a podcast. Porter asked Jokić how he felt about the public's attention. "It just feels sad," Jokić said.

Denver, where Jokić has spent his entire N.B.A. career, is not New York or Los Angeles or even Boston. In one of those cities, megastardom might have found him regardless. But Jokić, who played professionally for a couple of years in Serbia, as a teen-ager, was largely unheralded when he became eligible for the N.B.A. draft; he was chosen with the forty-first pick, in the second round. (No one else selected lower than the fifteenth pick has ever become the M.V.P., an award Jokić has now won twice.) He had a nebulous body. Even after he began to thrive, as a rookie, some fellow-players didn't know what to make of him. Julius Randle, of the New York Knicks, recently recalled the first time he faced Jokić. "I'm, like, Man, why is this dude killing, bro?" Randle said. "Slow and fat. He ain't nice like that, I guess, in my head. And, bro, he came, he played—he hit, like, twenty-five. I'm, like, Man, how the hell did this happen?" When LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo picked teams for the All-Star Game last season, in a televised event, Jokić, the reigning M.V.P., was left onstage until only he and the more modestly talented Lauri Markkanen remained. Thinking he was last, Jokić walked up to James and tapped him on the shoulder. James laughed, then mispronounced Jokić's name.

On the court after the finals, once Jokić had finished speaking to Salter, his two older brothers, Strahinja and Nemanja, both wearing Serbian Jokić jerseys, found him among the crowd. Strahinja, who is nearly Nikola's height and covered in tattoos, grabbed him below the waist and hoisted him off the ground. Jokić finally smiled, then rested his cheek on his brother's head. He kissed his wife, picked up his baby daughter, and hugged Nemanja. After he walked away, his brothers lingered, repeatedly tossing the Nuggets' compact head coach, Michael Malone, into the air.

Later, at a press conference, a reporter asked Jokić how he was feeling and whether he was looking forward to the championship parade. Jokić appeared worried, and asked a team staffer when the parade would be. Thursday, he was told. "No," he said. "I need to go home." He sighed and rubbed his forehead with his index fingers, as if easing a deep pain. "We succeeded in our jobs and we won the whole thing," he said. "It's an amazing feeling." He added, "There is a bunch of things that I like to do. I mean, probably, that's a normal thing. Nobody likes his job. Or maybe they do. They're lying." He twitched an eyebrow.

In the end, Jokić stayed until Thursday, went to the parade, got drunk on top of a fire truck, and addressed the more than half a million people who had gathered in downtown Denver. "You know that I told you that I don't want to stay on parade," he said. "But I fucking want to stay on parade. This is the best."

During the summer that followed, sightings of Jokić, back in Serbia, popped up sporadically online. He was at the racetrack in his home town of Sombor. He was at a club, dancing like a man who's had a drink or ten. He was partying, shirtless, with the tennis champion Novak Djokovic nearby. His teammate Aaron Gordon, a long-limbed power forward from California, came to visit, and they went to see Jokić's beloved horses race. In October, when training camp for the new season began, Jokić was asked if the summer after Denver's long road to the title was the most fun he'd had since his N.B.A. career began. "No," he said. "I think it's actually the opposite." Asked why, he said, "Because we played two and a half extra months."

The Nuggets opened the season with four wins before losing to the surprisingly good Timberwolves, in Minnesota. On a warm Friday evening in early November, they returned to Denver, to face the Dallas Mavericks. Ball Arena, where the Nuggets play, sits just off one of the city's main thoroughfares, a short walk from downtown. The arena abuts rows of restaurants and bars on one side and, on the other, a long expanse of flatland leading to the Rockies. The sunset over the mountains was particularly vivid that night, but its colors were nothing compared with the floor inside the building, which had been painted with a blue so bright it almost glowed. The game against Dallas was Denver's first in the In-Season Tournament, an N.B.A. innovation intended to drive interest—and TV ratings—early in the league calendar. To signify the game's specialness, a garish novelty court had been laid down.

Just before tipoff, in a nightly ritual

of preparation, Jokić cupped his hands and blew into them, a musician tuning his instrument. Jokić is an exceedingly physical player—he sets savage screens and grapples constantly with defenders; after every game, his triceps are covered in scratches—and yet the overriding impression he leaves is one of gentleness. That's not because his body is soft but because of the way he uses those hands, and their long, precise fingers. When the writer Thomas Beller e-mailed Ražnatović, Jokić's agent, with a question about his client's deft hands, Ražnatović replied, in all caps, "I EXPLAINED MANY TIMES TO THE PEOPLE, THAT HE HAS BIGGEST TALENT IN FINGERS THAT I HAVE EVER SEEN."

That talent was soon on display. About three minutes into the game, after the Nuggets guard Jamal Murray missed a jump shot, Jokić, with his left arm wrapped around the arm of a defender—whom he both pinned and used as a lever—flicked the ball, on the rebound, into the basket, as if waving it in off his fingertips. Jokić touches the ball more often, per game, than any other current player does, but he rarely keeps it long: his seconds per touch—one of countless stats tracked in the increasingly analytical world of pro basketball—is not among the top hundred and fifty in the league. In a spectacular but also entirely typical sequence, earlier in the season, he handed the ball to Murray and cut to the basket. Murray threw the ball back to Jokić, who, instead of catching it, simply punched it to Gordon. Gordon passed it back, and Jokić scored easily. The crowd gasped, then roared.

The Mavericks came into their game against the Nuggets undefeated, and they have their own M.V.P. candidate in the Slovenian star Luka Dončić. But shortly into the second quarter the Nuggets were winning by sixteen. Jokić was playing near the basket and hitting just about every shot he took. As the buzzer sounded for halftime, he sank a long three-point shot and let out a rare yell. The crowd erupted. He finished one assist shy of a triple-double, and the Nuggets won easily.

Afterward, Jokić dutifully fulfilled his postgame press obligations, keeping his deep-set eyes mostly trained on his hands, mumbling throughout. I asked him about the one downside to his adventurous style: his passes aren't always caught; sometimes the other team ends up with the ball. Against Dallas, he'd had four turnovers, and the team as a whole had had seventeen. Did the Nuggets need to worry about balancing creativity and caution? Jokić said that they could play smarter, and made a self-deprecating reference to a "behind-the-back pass to nobody" that he'd thrown. In truth, up close, even his turnovers often look purposeful. "If I see something, even if it's risky, I am going to try it," he once said. "Because maybe that mistake is going to open up something else—or, next time, it is going to be there. Just to give it a chance." Jokić nurtures the game, in other words; he makes it grow. When Malone, the coach, took his turn at the microphone, he praised his star. "He doesn't fight the game," he said.

A few years ago, Dejan Milojević, who coached Jokić when he played for Mega Basket, a team in Belgrade, told *Sports Illustrated* about a drill he used to run with his players. A big man would catch the ball, then either pass or try to score, depending on the number of fingers—odd or even—that an assistant coach, standing on the sidelines, was holding up. The drill was meant to speed up the players' decision-making. Jokić was so good at it that Milojević enlisted two assistants to stand on opposite sides of the court; Jokić was required to look at each of them, calculate the total number of fingers the pair were holding up,

and then, based on whether the number was odd or even, make his move. Jokić could do this, too, Milojević said.

Basketball has been among the biggest sports in Jokić's homeland since at least the nineteen-seventies, when Serbia was part of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslavian team won two world championships. Jokić grew up playing it in Sombor, a leafy town in Serbia's northwest, near its borders with Hungary and Croatia. ("It's nice," he once offered of Sombor. "You can Google it.") He and his brothers lived in a two-bedroom apartment with their parents and grandmother. They played full-contact games of basketball on a little indoor hoop; Strahinja and Nemanja were as aggressive with their kid brother as they were protective of him. Jokić has spoken fondly of a day when Strahinja threw knives around Jokić's head because he refused to climb a tree during a picnic.

Strahinja became a pro in Serbia, and Nemanja got a scholarship offer to play at the University of Detroit Mercy. Another Serbian star, Darko Miličić, was already in Detroit—he had been selected by the Detroit Pistons in the 2003 N.B.A. draft, as the second over-all pick, just after LeBron James. Nemanja moved in with him. Miličić partied hard and eventually flamed out. Nemanja enjoyed the N.B.A. life style, too, he has said, but he didn't make it to the N.B.A. He got as far as the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Steamers, of the Premier Basketball League. The Steamers folded after one season, and Nemanja returned to Serbia.

Jokić was seventeen when Nemanja came home, in 2012. By that point, the youngest of the three brothers was not only the tallest but also the most obviously gifted as a player. Jokić didn't watch many N.B.A. games as a child, because they came on around three in the morning. But then YouTube caught on, and Jokić caught up. In a piece for the Players' Tribune, from 2016, he described watching old highlights: "Magic because of his passing, and Hakeem because of his post moves, and Jordan because he is Jordan." The piece was titled "How We Play Basketball in Serbia," and Serbians do, in fact, have a distinct approach to the game. Aleksandar Nikolić, who coached Yugoslavia's national team in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, introduced a developmental philosophy: all players, no matter their size, should learn to play each position. "When I started playing basketball, I was tall, and I knew down the road I'd play forward or center," the Serbian Hall of Famer Vlade Divac, who was on the Lakers and the Sacramento Kings, told me. "But, playing youth basketball, the coach made me play guard and handle the ball." Divac, who eventually grew to seven feet one, became an unusually adept passer.

When he played for the Lakers, in the nineties, his stats were announced on the morning news in Belgrade.

Jokić joined a team in Novi Sad, a little south of Sombor. Miško Ražnatović, who owned Mega Basket at the time, began to notice Jokić's box scores in the local paper. He recruited him to his team, which was founded in part to develop young players. It has been startlingly successful: in the past decade, the teams that have produced the most N.B.A. draft picks are Kentucky, Duke, U.C.L.A., Michigan, and Mega Basket.

Milojević, who was Jokić's first real professional coach, told Ražnatović that the young center was not yet in physical shape to play professional basketball—and also that he was going to be a star. He encouraged Jokić's creativity, which was already evident. "He was throwing all these ridiculous passes—and it drove me crazy," Milojević said later. "But I saw something wonderful, so I didn't want to focus his mind on mistakes. I let these things go so he could grow and learn from them."

N.B.A. scouts soon learned Jokić's name. But there existed what Tim Connelly, the executive who drafted Jokić, called an "optic bias." "Unathletic" was the polite way of putting it. Jokić copped to a fondness for Coke by the litre and for *burek*, a Serbian pastry usually filled with meat or cheese. In 2014, when he went to P3, an athletic center in Santa Barbara where the physical dimensions and abilities of N.B.A. prospects receive microscopic scrutiny, he recorded one of the shortest vertical leaps that the trainers had ever seen—just seventeen inches. But, watching Jokić, one learns that the common definition of athleticism is too narrow. The discomfort that some people had with his body blinded them to his unusual physical gifts: remarkably rapid footwork, raptor-like vision, dexterous hands and arms. The evaluators at P3 also test how fast a player can get his hands to the height at which the ball typically bounces off the rim. At this, Jokić was among the ten quickest players of all time.

The Nuggets executives were impressed, but had little idea of what Jokić would become. They used their first pick that year to acquire a different Balkan big man, the Bosnian center Jusuf Nurkić, taking Jokić later. Jokić was confusing, as a player—despite his height, he played below the rim; he could control the pace of the game, but often did so by slowing it down. For a while, Malone, who had just been hired as the coach, started Nurkić and had Jokić come off the bench. Then he tried playing them together, which was a disaster. In Jokić's second season, ten days before Christmas, Malone slotted him in as the starting center, and Denver's offense exploded: although Jokić didn't always score much, the Nuggets' offense fared better when he was on the floor. Some Denver fans refer to this date on the calendar as "Jokmas," and celebrate it every year. (Nurkić was soon traded to another team.)

"Don't look at me. Look at the relaxing art work."

• •

Jokić got an apartment in Denver, and his girlfriend, Natalija, who had grown up near him in Sombor, moved in. So did his brothers. The ultra-competitive indoor games recommenced. The Nuggets steadily improved, and in 2019 they won a playoff series for the first time in a decade. Their series in the next round went to a decisive seventh game, which they lost. Jokić was the star, and played a gobsmacking sixty-five minutes in a quadruple-overtime loss, in Game Three. He had long since dropped the Coke habit. But, by the end of the playoffs, he was drained. Jokić played for the Serbian national team that summer, during the World Cup, and his lack of conditioning became obvious; the team finished a disappointing fifth. He decided to adopt a much more rigorous training program, which he still follows. (After sweeping the Lakers last summer, he was seen leaving the celebration to lift weights.)

One of the most dependable ways for a basketball team to score is for the players without the ball to move constantly, cutting across the court and circling back and setting screens. This is exhausting; even the world's best-conditioned athletes aren't going to keep it up without sufficient motivation. Because Jokić passes so much, and so quickly, he makes all that movement worth his teammates' while. If they pass the ball to him, they know it will find its way back to them. If they cut, easy baskets will be theirs.

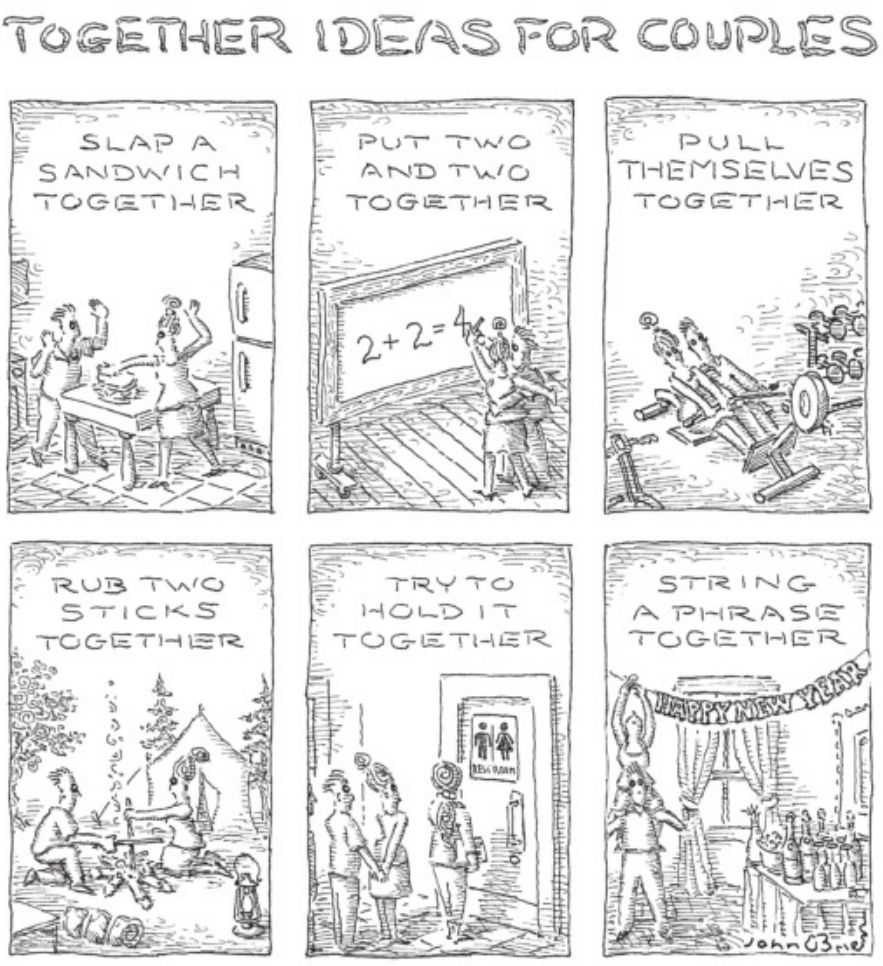
And the more that Jokić played with his teammates the better he was able to anticipate exactly where their hands would be, and when. He developed an especially uncanny connection with Murray, the guard, a quick player with a great jump shot. In the 2019-20 season, which was interrupted by the COVID pandemic, the playoffs were held in a so-called bubble, in Florida. There, Jokić and Murray led the Nuggets to the third

round. Handing the ball back and forth, and circling defenders, they did a kind of dance, creating space to operate, throwing off opponents who had to account for the myriad possibilities of what might happen next. The Nuggets ultimately lost, to the Lakers, but Murray and Jokić's brilliance was a bright distraction in a dark time.

During the following season, Murray tore his A.C.L., and Jokić learned to bear the load alone. He began to accept that his prowess as a passer opened up space for him to score—opponents were loath to double-team him, knowing that he'd find the open man. He began racking up thirty-point games. Although the Nuggets couldn't get far in the playoffs without Murray, Jokić won his first M.V.P. award.

Eight days later, he announced that he would not be playing for the Serbian national team in the qualifying tournament for the Olympics. A Serbian tabloid called him a "national traitor" on its cover. Darko Rajaković, a Serbian who now coaches the Toronto Raptors, and who has been following Jokić's career since Jokić was a teen-ager, said that the decision was understandable, but that some Serbians couldn't accept it. "It's different, how we look at playing for the national team," he said, adding that "the whole country stops when the national team plays." Braca Djordjević, one of Serbia's first N.B.A. play-by-play men, told me that Serbians have a fluid relationship to Jokić: pride in his exploits during the N.B.A. season followed by creeping anger as spring turns to summer, if Jokić has declined, that year, to play for the national team. "Jokić is a simple guy," Djordjević said. "But around him there are a lot of complicated things going on, which he doesn't want to have anything to do with."

Jokić and Natalija had married in the fall of 2020. In the fall of 2021, their daughter was born. Earlier in his career, Jokić occasionally participated in profiles that were written about him. Around this time, that ended. "You have to change to protect yourself and your family from external factors that affect your lives," he said, in a rare intimate interview, which he gave to his sister-in-law, for her blog. He has begun tying his wedding ring into his shoe before games. Sometimes, after the buzzer, he and his daughter each point to one palm, a gesture that is part of a song they like to sing together. He bought a horse, and then another, and then another. He won a second M.V.P. award, and the Nuggets surprised him by presenting it at his stable, in Sombor. Jokić rolled up in a horse-drawn cart, wearing a black tank top and a bulky helmet. A band was there, playing traditional Serbian folk music. Caught off guard by the moment, he began to cry.



On another night at Ball Arena in November, as the Nuggets were handily beating the Chicago Bulls, I left my seat in press row for the media center, a small room full of long tables lined with electrical outlets; a couple of TVs hung on the wall. I wanted to call Bill Walton, who I knew would be watching the game at home, in California. In his prime, Walton was the N.B.A.'s best-passing big man. He's had a second act as a basketball romantic who offers commentary on the game in the manner of Walt Whitman rhapsodizing about a commute to Manhattan. After I got him on the phone, we watched Jokić hit a shot over a Bulls defender, off one foot, falling away from the basket. Walton yelled, "He blooms like a rose, or cascades like a waterfall!" Later, a particularly nice pass to a teammate ahead of the action got him shouting about Jokić again: "He's like the Arkansas River coming down off Independence Pass!"

Walton is one of only a few players to whom Jokić is plausibly compared. But when I asked Walton about this he brushed off the suggestion. He pointed instead to the speedy and diminutive guard Steve Nash, who won two M.V.P.s in the mid-two-thousands. I hadn't heard that one before. "Of all the players I've ever seen," Walton said, "Steve Nash is the one who left me awestruck more than anybody else, because he never had a physical advantage." Jokić, like Nash, creates room to operate by dictating the rhythm of the game, he added. "It doesn't matter if that pace is faster or slower, it's just got to be different. Because the difference of your pace creates the separation."

When the game ended, I headed to the Nuggets' locker room. Jokić, elusive

as ever, wasn't there. But it was easy to spot his locker, adorned with two small pictures of horses in harness and a red ribbon that his horse Dream Catcher was given for its first racing win. Next to the locker stood Aaron Gordon, the happy recipient of some of Jokić's most spectacular lobs. Gordon was drafted the same year that Jokić was, but much higher—he was the No. 4 pick, taken by the Orlando Magic. He was, and is, an exhilarating athlete, but in Orlando he was something of a disappointment. That team didn't have an orchestrator like Jokić; Gordon had to do too much. Jokić "expands the game," Gordon told me, and also shrinks it for his teammates, by letting them focus on what they do best. It isn't only the variety of Jokić's skill set that makes this possible, Gordon suggested, but the consistency of his character on and off the floor. "He's just so congruent," Gordon said.

Basketball players tend to pattern their games on those who have come before. The very best improve upon their predecessors. Jokić shares qualities with many players—the footwork of Hakeem Olajuwon, the interior shooting touch of Wilt Chamberlain—and he comes from a long line of European big men who can pass. But Walton had me wondering if I could find a more direct basketball ancestor. After leaving Denver, I called Larry Brown, who coached for twenty-six seasons in the N.B.A. He suggested that Jokić most resembled the two greats who came just after Walton's prime: Larry Bird and Magic Johnson.

Bird is mentioned often in connection with Jokić, perhaps because he combined exquisite passing with pinpoint shooting and had a similarly distinctive shooting form—and also, perhaps, because he's white. Magic, who is not, was the more surprising and, I thought, more apt analogue. An executive with one N.B.A. team told me that Magic is the point of reference he and his colleagues use, too, and not only because the players are both virtuosos of the assist. Magic was nearly Jokić's height, the executive noted, and seemed to see the whole court from above in much the same way. Later, Jerry West, the great Laker guard who became a general manager and helped build the Lakers dynasty led by Magic, told me that it wasn't Magic he thought of but Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, because "they both played with great finesse." Then I asked Magic about it. "I love it," he said. "I think that we dominate with our mind, our basketball I.Q." He added, with a laugh, "Also, teammates love playing with us. At every level, we excel."

Two days after trouncing the Bulls, Jokić recorded his hundred-and-eighth career triple-double, in a win against the New Orleans Pelicans, surpassing LeBron James and Jason Kidd for fourth on the all-time list. Next on the list, at No. 3, is Magic. After the game, Jokić conducted his press conference himself. "I can just talk, because I know what you're gonna ask," he announced, proceeding to offer answers to unspoken questions. Soon, Jokić was leading the league in points, assists, and rebounds. Murray had missed a few weeks with an injury, and so Jokić was taking more shots than ever, and making most of them. In one four-game stretch, he missed a total of five shots; during a nine-game stretch, more than eighty per cent of his shots went in. No one had scored so efficiently in the course of so many attempts since Wilt Chamberlain, nearly sixty years ago.

Chamberlain is one of just three players to win the N.B.A. M.V.P. three seasons in a row. (The other two are Bird and Bill Russell.) When Jokić seemed on the verge of joining them, last season, a mostly genteel, occasionally stat-filled fight broke out among N.B.A. commentators. Was he really as great as all that? At the time, he had not yet won his first title. How could someone with no championships be set alongside the greatest players of all time? Was this happening only because he's white?

The foil for Jokić in these arguments was another great center, Joel Embiid, from Cameroon. Embiid, who plays for the Philadelphia 76ers, is graceful and muscular and looks every bit the N.B.A. superstar. Like Jokić, he learned some of his skills from YouTube; he has said that he searched the phrase "white people shooting 3 pointers." He is a cerebral player, too, but can't read the floor quite as well as Jokić—no one can—and dominates the ball in a way that Jokić does not. Last season, he got the better of Jokić in a high-profile game, and was eventually named the new league M.V.P. Then the Sixers lost in the second round of the playoffs. This became additional material for the dispute, which persists, encompassing questions about race, reputation, and the state of defense in the N.B.A. Asked about the controversy, Jokić said that Embiid deserved to win, and that to suggest otherwise was "mean."

In the middle of January, the Nuggets began a swing through the Northeast, starting with Philadelphia, where Jokić faced Embiid for the first time this season. Embiid, who is scoring at a historic rate, seemed to relish the prospect, at one point jumping off the bench to enter the game when he saw Jokić readying to return, as if going mano a mano. It was a tight, entertaining contest. Jokić had nineteen rebounds and scored twenty-five points, but Embiid scored forty-one, and the Sixers pulled away at the end. Still, Embiid, after the game, acknowledged that Jokić maintained a hold on the title of world's best player. "He's the finals M.V.P.," Embiid said. "Until someone else takes that away." A few hours later, Jokić was spotted with teammates having a beer and chicken wings at a local bar.

The next day, Steve Kerr, the coach of the Golden State Warriors, contacted Malone to tell him that Dejan Milojević, Jokić's coach at Mega, had died of a heart attack, at the age of forty-six. Milojević, who was known as Deki, had become an assistant with the Warriors. "A perfect man," Jokić called him, in 2022. "When I grow up," he added, "I would like to be like Deki."

The Warriors postponed their next two games. The Nuggets went to Boston, to play the Celtics, who were undefeated at home, having won twenty straight. That evening, in front of the Garden, a frigid wind whipped down Causeway Street.

About ninety minutes before the game started, Jokić came out of the tunnel that leads to the court and found a chair. He sat by himself for a long time. Then he walked onto the floor, drifted in a few hook shots, and settled into his routine. When the game began, he tripped on the Nuggets' first possession, losing the ball. On the second, he missed a shot near the basket. On the third, he threw a pass out of bounds. Then he began to control the tempo. He made seven of his next eight shots, and assumed his usual role as the game's center of gravity. He played nearly forty minutes, and the Nuggets won by two. Afterward, Jokić declined to speak. ♦

PERSONAL HISTORY

THE FRIENDSHIP CHALLENGE

How envy destroyed the perfect connection between two teen-age girls.

BY MARY GAITSKILL

"I don't really know how competitive I am by nature, because if you can't consciously acknowledge something you can't see where you are in relation to it." I wrote this sentence to an acquaintance with whom I was having a long e-mail exchange about Elena Ferrante's novel "My Brilliant Friend," which follows the early phase of an intense, lifelong, and highly competitive relationship between two Neapolitan girls in postwar Italy. Like a lot of things one dashes off in e-mails, the sentence isn't strictly true: I *can* acknowledge when I'm competitive, particularly in a professional situation—but the acknowledgment is muffled, half suppressed. The competitiveness always takes me by surprise, coming, for example, in the form of a sudden sneaky urge to best someone in a minor contest that means very little. Upon "winning" in such situations, I feel a satisfaction that embarrasses me, or sometimes remorse; upon losing, a petty bitterness that is also embarrassing. Either way, I generally don't let myself experience the feelings for long.

And those are the clear-cut situations, meaning they're subject to some sort of professional metric—say, critical reception or audience response at a reading. In spite of my discomfort, I think that competition in such situations is natural, probably an unavoidable fact of life. Maybe it's even good for you! But Ferrante's novel, the first in a series, describes something far more intimate, complex, and, to me, disturbing. Reading it, I was reminded of a line I heard many years ago, perhaps on a radio show, that struck me with memorable force: "Men compete about what they *do;* women compete about what they *are*." Which, to me, means that women are competitive about the value of their most fundamental traits, including their physical features. Ferrante's narrator, Elena, does describe some competition about things the girls do, mostly involving skills like reading or getting good grades in school. But, as the characters get older, the protean imp of competition creeps and grows, finding its way into a seemingly infinite number of more personal comparisons: who gets her period first, who has bigger breasts, who's more popular and why, who gives better advice, who speaks better, whose body language is cooler. They are basically competing over everything, all the time; Elena never seems to give it a break.

It sounded unbearable, and as I read the novel I felt a mounting sense of dismay. "I really don't want that in a friend!" I declared in my e-mail on the subject. What I wanted, I explained, was warmth and support. But I began to wonder if the fact that I hadn't had relationships like the one Ferrante described meant that something was off about me, that maybe I had missed an important developmental stage. For what struck me most about the Ferrante novel was how those feelings of intense, self-lacerating jealousy coexisted with deep love; the girls love and uphold each other, like boxers resting in a moment of clinch. I wondered if this was a closeness I'd never known because some weird timidity had prevented me from acknowledging my own competitive instincts at the crucial stage described by Ferrante.

Except that at least once, I realized, there had been acknowledgment. It came in a spasm of feeling when I was fifteen, feeling on which I acted furtively and harmfully, so harmfully that I think I insured I would never do so again. Yet I can't bring myself to fully regret it. Because it was at least an expression of

ILLUSTRATION BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

emotions that I suddenly could not suppress: fierce longing for something I did not have, and envy of someone who embodied it—a teen-age girl I'll call Sandrine.

Sandrine appeared the summer before my first year of high school (we would have been thirteen then), when her family moved into a house a block and a half away from mine, in a small town in Michigan. Our friendship began with proximity—indeed, I'm not sure that it would have happened if it weren't for that initial proximity, a chance connection through another girl in the neighborhood. I was drawn first by Sandrine's personality. She had a unique manner that was sharp and diffident by turns, and a sophisticated vocabulary that sounded natural; she used slang only sarcastically. She was curious, and more perceptive than the other kids I knew; she took delight in absurd details. Oddly, I don't think that I really "saw" her beauty at first, though I could not have been oblivious to it. At thirteen, she was mature, both ethereal and earthy, nothing like the ideal of blond snub-nosed cuteness that was so prized in my adolescent milieu. I've written about her once before, describing her as a brunette Julie Christie, but, really, she was more like Jean Shrimpton—to the extent that she was like anyone. Hair: wavy, nearly black. Skin: flawless, very pale. Eyes: large, dark, full of expression. Lips: naturally red. Body: average height but dramatically proportioned. During the summer that we became friends, she wore jeans and T-shirts, but on the first day of school she showed up in a low-cut minidress made of sheer black silky material that accentuated her tiny waist, with puffy sleeves and a flared skirt, and black high heels. She wore no makeup other than false eyelashes, creating a theatrical effect that was enhanced by a clip-on fall (an artificial hairpiece). The popular girls—plaid skirts, loafers—were speechless at finding themselves so outclassed. The boys were too intimidated to catcall or even to stare openly. I thought it was awesome.

Although I had spent a good part of the summer with her, I don't think I had realized until that day how overpoweringly beautiful she was.

To understand the depth of my reaction, then and later, it helps to know that I was implicitly brought up to believe that wanting to stand out too much (in the sense of being better than others) was improper. I doubt that my parents would make such a direct statement if they were still alive, and, as an adult, I can see that my mother was sometimes conflicted on the subject. For example, she had modest ambitions to be an artist, which is almost impossible if you aren't willing to stand out. But, for me as a child, the message seemed straightforward, especially when it came to physical beauty: having good looks or style might be desirable, but you weren't supposed to care about or pursue them too much. You certainly were not supposed to be envious of others who had them.

According to family lore, my mother had been a short, plain, serious girl who was outshone by her two tall, beautiful, glamorous sisters, both of whom won local beauty contests. This lore was presented not bitterly but with an air of humility and charm. In truth, my mother was quite pretty (in my opinion, prettier than her youngest sister), but she wore her unconcern about it like a badge of moral honor. She applied makeup only on special occasions, and did so minimally; she dressed simply and conservatively. She considered Marilyn Monroe and Raquel Welch gross and cheap and reserved her admiration for women who traded in character, as opposed to sex appeal, like Katharine Hepburn. She revered the British actress Diana Rigg for her strong, intelligent persona, which seemed to inform her beauty rather than to rely on it. Once, when I was maybe twelve, I asked my mother if I was pretty, and she emphatically replied, "You will be, but it's silly to care about things like that."

Her attitude had a bracing quality, evoking the value of something higher than appearances: art, culture, authenticity. She had grown up with a meagre sense of what was possible and wanted more—the real deal, not superficial junk like beauty contests. As a child, I responded to the ardent dignity in this; I was bewildered and disturbed by the sexual beauty that I glimpsed on TV and was actually repelled by Barbie dolls, whose physique I would one day be expected to aspire to. I was on my mom's side!

Or at least I was until I began to realize that, in the world of my peers, appearance and style were *very* important, and that failure in these areas would cost me. Looks may not have mattered much to my family, but budgets did, so my mother dressed my sisters and me in hand-me-downs sent by our former-beauty-queen aunts—clothes that did not fit us properly and eventually got us laughed at, particularly when we moved to a place where no one knew us. I was caught off guard by this scorn, and I think my mother was, too. She adjusted and took us shopping at Montgomery Ward for cheap, boring "outfits" that for some mystifying reason were more acceptable than the higher-quality hand-me-downs.

Thus began my experience of fashion as a joyless requirement, something you had to follow in order to achieve minimal acceptance—in order, that is, to not be ridiculed by people you might not even like. I say "might" because I wasn't sure what I felt about the popular kids who rejected me. They often seemed cruel and not very interesting—but at the same time they were vital and expressive and clearly having a lot more fun than I was. I did like some nerdier girls and even bonded with one over "Lord of the Flies." I was also friendly with a plainspoken girl jock who covered her notebooks with Magic Marker drawings of rearing, running horses; she was different, in a good way, but we had little in common. Apart from her, the non-popular kids seemed mostly bland and recessive. Which was probably how I also seemed.

And then behold: Sandrine came out of the blue (I have no memory of where she actually did come from) and upended the whole idiotic system. Her ability to do this could not be explained entirely by her beauty, though that was certainly part of it, as were her fantastic clothes. The most galvanic ingredient was her attitude, her seemingly natural disregard for the norms that effectively cowed everyone else, including

the people who enforced them. She had courage! I never saw her being ridiculed or put down in the way that other unusually attractive and overtly sexual girls sometimes were. It was as if she occupied her own category that no one knew how to respond to.

Except me. I knew to adore it. And, to my delight, she seemed to adore me back, to value and respect me as much as I did her. Throughout the next year, we carpooled, ate lunch, and walked home from school together, usually to her house, where I spent as much time as possible in her room, listening to music (she introduced me to Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix), talking about people, books, and feelings, making up insulting nicknames for classmates we didn't like (La Toilette) and sweet nicknames for those we did (the Calf). We despised school spirit, we despised the hypocrisy of politicians, we despised the English-class sanctimony about "To Kill a Mockingbird." We defensively despised a lot of things, but we were vulnerable with each other. We wrote in our journals together and then shared them; we once spontaneously harmonized on a plaintive lyric from "Tommy," the Who's ecstatic 1969 rock opera, singing, "See me, feel me, touch me, heal me," then cranking up the volume and listening raptly to the loud, triumphant part. This was not something I could have imagined doing with anyone else.

We did outside-the-room things, too—I recall going to an antiwar demonstration at a nearby college (the older boys smiled benignly at me, then devoured Sandrine with their eyes) and on fishing trips with her parents. But the main thing I remember about our time together was the feeling of it: the slightly hysterical laughter, the moments of sudden earnestness, the adolescent conviction that we knew things our peers didn't, the private confessions, the *intimacy* that for me sometimes bordered on erotic (I once asked her if she'd ever wanted to make out with a girl; she hadn't), the increasingly miraculous sense that there was much more to the world than I had thought possible.

This sense of the possible became, in my imagination, epitomized by Sandrine's crazily romantic clothes, some of which were, to my astonishment, made for her by her mother: a miniskirt with layers of multi-textured fabric, lacy low-cut blouses with butterfly sleeves, a blue velvet empire-waist dress bejewelled with rhinestones at the neckline, thigh-high platform boots, a maxi trenchcoat—all worn with the false eyelashes and the fall of fake hair.

"I like you, but your family exhausts me."

I don't know why I didn't feel jealous sooner. But I didn't, either because I loved Sandrine and felt so privileged to be friends with her that any negative feelings were overridden or because—perhaps like my mother in regard to her sisters—I had the wild ego to believe that I was, in some secret way, her equal. And, indeed, she treated me as if I was. This was one of the remarkable things about her—that she apparently did not buy into social categories *at all*. (The strongest proof of this was that, when she eventually got a boyfriend, he was not someone with social cachet but a quiet, handsome borderline nerd, a choice that must have sent shock waves through the school.) She had to have been aware that I was lower in, or even close to the bottom of, the social pecking order. Some people would probably suggest that Sandrine preferred that because the contrast between us made her appear more powerful. I can assure those people that, if she had been wired that way, she could have chosen a handmaiden who was more flattering to her. If she didn't care about social metrics, then neither did I.

Until I did. I don't know if there was a specific trigger. But roughly a year into the friendship I began to covet what Sandrine had. In particular, I coveted her clothes. The next summer, before school started, I tried, for the first time in my life, to shop for clothes that might bring out my own kind of allure. Given my undeveloped form, the limits of the local mall, and my mother's strict ideas about how a girl should dress, this was effectively impossible. I remember persuading my mother to buy me a jumper that emphasized my small bust and then covertly padding my bra, and the terrible fight that ensued. I bitched that Sandrine's mother cared enough to make her gorgeous clothes; my mother rejoined that I didn't need clothes like that, that Sandrine's clothes made her look like a cow, a gibe that appalled me in its sheer inaccuracy. During another fight, she said that my friend dressed "like a whore."

I don't think my mother meant these disgusting insults; I might have respected her more if she had. She talked this way not out of conviction, I sensed, but because of what I began to intuit was jealousy. In addition to beauty, Sandrine had in spades what my mother supposedly valued: culture, art, authenticity. Why didn't she admire her? Why didn't she want me to have what my friend had? I didn't analyze the situation this way at the time, but I began to suspect that my mother's rejection of appearances was not so principled, that she was rejecting something she actually wanted but believed she couldn't have, something she assumed her daughter couldn't—perhaps *shouldn't*—have, either. "You're pretty in a different way!" my mother exclaimed. "You look like Botticelli's 'Spring'!" But her compliment felt weak, mired in insecurity.

My mother's muddled feelings about conspicuous beauty were mirrored by my father's relationship to showy men: a teacher at a community college, he hated braggarts who flaunted expensive clothes or cars, and he sometimes blew off steam about them at home. I remember him recounting an exchange he'd had with a car salesman who tried to goad and shame him by declaring, "So you want a car just for transportation?" My father answered, "What do *you* want it for? Sex?" Which was funny and, I guess, shut the guy up! But the story wasn't told with triumph. It was told with anger and a hint of humiliation. My father may have been angry at having his good sense disparaged by an asshole. But he may also have been angry because some part of him wanted, against his better judgment, to drive a big, sexy car. A car that he could have bought if he'd had more money.

When I remember these moments, I picture someone stepping in one direction while turning back to look in another, not clearly committing to either. I remember, too, certain photographs of my parents from when they were young. Both were small and slender, and they exuded a touching combination of vulnerability and vital, even proud spirit. What I'm calling their spirit would not let them accept the standards that disadvantaged them—but their vulnerability made them unable to completely reject those standards, whether of beauty or of social status.

This is, of course, an interpretation and a simplification of something so complicated that I am struggling to describe it. But the ethos of enforced modesty seems key, the attempt to shield their children from anything that might look like competition, including with one another. ("I'm proud of all my daughters," my mother would say, a blanket statement that somehow cancelled itself out.) This modesty had a genuine, even wholesome aspect: we were never pressured to get straight A's, or *any* A's; B's were fine—there was no need to prove our intelligence. But the underside was a kind of flattening effect: a lack of space for exuberant adolescent ego, combined with a palpable sense of suppression, frustration, and sudden, erratic anger, especially on my father's part.

And there was an anomaly that I never quite considered as such until this moment: when I was in middle school, well before I met Sandrine, my mother started taking me to see a child psychiatrist, a choice that, well, made me stand out, at least in the family. (Few of my peers knew about this; it was impressed on me that I shouldn't tell them. Sandrine was one of two people I told.) There were reasons for my mother's decision. At the age of twelve, I was depressed and very socially withdrawn, mostly as a result of being bullied; when I began to express curiosity about suicide, she felt that she had no choice. It probably helped that psychiatric care was starting to be viewed as normal, even rather sophisticated—and, because going to a psychiatrist was an admission that there was something wrong with you, it could scarcely be seen as swellheaded. At first, I was fine with it; I even enjoyed talking to the strange, friendly man who was so interested in everything I had to say. But, by the time I entered high school, the novelty had worn off, and I was beginning to see him as an extension of my mother.

It was a painful time of profound distance between my family and me, and my friendship with Sandrine intersected intensely with all of this. Sandrine (a fourteen-year-old kid!) was not the cause of anything in my psyche, but my friendship with her illuminated my longing for something beyond the scope of my apparent trajectory, a longing that almost certainly touched a sensitive familial nerve. There were terrible scenes at home—paternal anger that was physically directed at me a couple of times. My mother must have become anxious about our increasingly turbulent environment.

And so, at the suggestion of the psychiatrist, who had worked with me for years, she convinced my father that, in the middle of my sophomore year, I needed to be sent away to boarding school. In retrospect, this idea seems nothing short of bizarre, especially coming from a mental-health professional. My parents could not even begin to afford the place (they obtained financial aid by having me declared a ward of the state on some bureaucratic technicality, as advised by the psychiatrist), and anyone with a modicum of sense could guess that, given my general social awkwardness, I would not

"And this year's award for best two and a half hours that could have been ninety minutes goes to . . ."

• •

be equipped to deal with such a rarefied environment. Again, it was a choice that marked me as special but in a problematic way, particularly given that the school had been described to me and to my mother as a place for emotionally troubled kids. Another oddity: though the school was described that way to us, and I do remember some of the kids seeming somewhat troubled, I don't recall there being any psychologists on site, and I don't recall emotional troubles being mentioned in the school's glossy brochures.

Trying to make sense of this, I am incongruously reminded of a conversation that I once overheard between my step-grandmother and my mother. Their relationship was sometimes tense, and my step-grandmother made no secret of her preference for my beauty-queen aunts and their children. I don't remember the entire conversation, but it had to do with the importance of summer jobs for teaching teens fiscal responsibility. The one piece I recall is my step-grandmother saying that my cousins had got great jobs at the local country club, and my mother angrily replying, "My children aren't going to get jobs at the country club." More vividly than the words, I remember the expressions on their faces: my step-grandmother's low-key spite and my mother's chagrin. I believe that my mother was truly appalled by the old woman's mean-spirited snobbery—and I believe that some part of her wanted to think that her daughters could be at home in a country-club environment. I wonder if my boarding school was a covert version of the country club, fancy but snobbery-proof because, supposedly, you had to be troubled to get in.

But I didn't think about any of that at the time. Boarding school was a deeply romantic concept for me, one that I knew from reading English novels; if it was for the emotionally wayward, that only made it more interesting. I was delighted to get away from home and from my school and go to an environment where I could start fresh, and maybe even shine.

It was to this end (freshness, shine) that I decided to steal some of my friend's clothes. It's possible that I first asked if I could borrow a few pieces and she said no, but I'm not sure. What I *am* sure of is that on a couple of my long afternoon visits, while she was in the bathroom, I opened her closet and snatched a skirt, a blouse, and even two dresses and stuffed the flimsy, talismanically beautiful things into my oversized purse. This was just days before my departure. I don't remember if Sandrine noticed that the clothes were missing or said anything to me about them. I do remember hiding them in the closet that I shared with my sisters, planning to put them in my suitcase at the last minute. But I was foiled by the close supervision of my mother, and the purloined items stayed in the closet for maybe a month after my departure, at which point they were discovered, probably by my mother, who called Sandrine.

So many things were going on then that I am not sure what happened or in what sequence. I don't have a clear memory of apologizing to Sandrine either by phone or by letter, but I think we must have talked about it, because I clearly remember her assuring me that she wasn't mad about what she called "that stupid clothes incident." We continued talking and writing to each other—I still have some of the letters—until I was expelled from the boarding school, about three months after I arrived.

Yes, three months. The school culture—wealthy kids with lives of (to me) unimaginable privilege and experience, including the kind of experience with drugs and sex which would have got you ostracized where I'd come from—was dizzying to me. That, combined with a lack of supervision, higher academic standards, and things like dress codes, was just too much to negotiate. I may not have had Sandrine's clothes, but I did have the freedom to buy a couple of tight shirts and fanciful appliqués for my jeans, plus eye makeup that would not have been allowed at home. (I bought these things with the money allotted for a school uniform, which I never got around to purchasing.)

Remarkably, I found myself accepted into a clique of comparatively sophisticated hippie kids, who were able to smoke pot, drop acid, meditate obsessively on Hindu religious texts, and talk about the mystery of existence versus the weirdness of society late into the night while keeping up with their classwork; they'd had practice. The sense of belonging was intoxicating to me, even

if it was superficial—but I lacked the sense to realize that it was superficial.

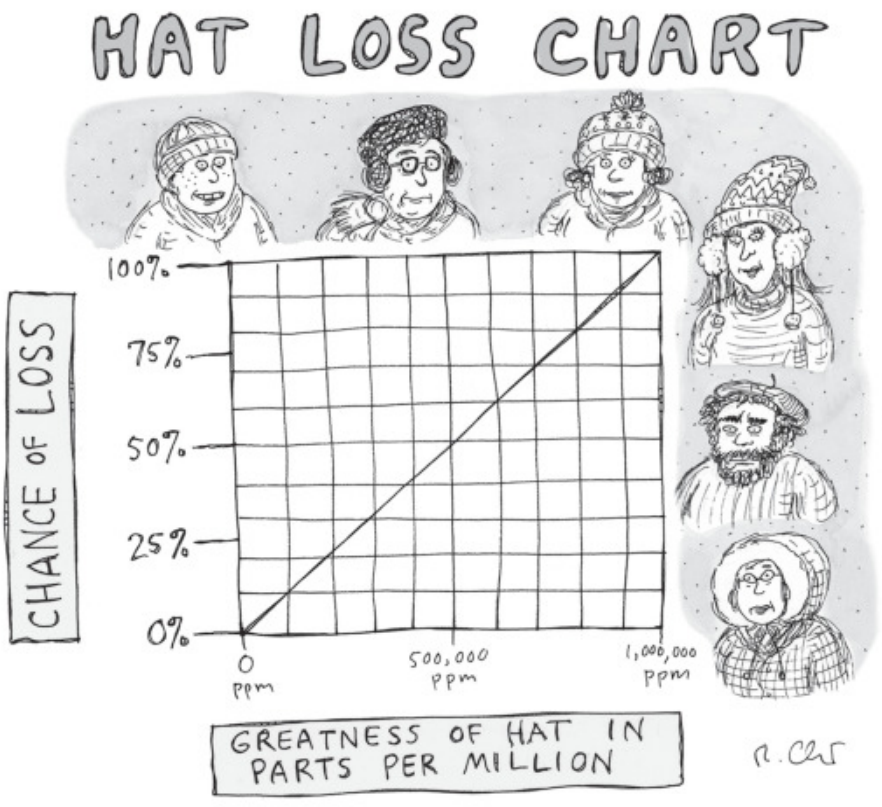
Whatever it was, I liked it much, much better than sitting on the sidelines, despising things. But I didn't know how to integrate this social abundance with the need to focus and study. And there was something else: without the burden of my past unpopularity, and no longer in close proximity to an intimidating beauty, I was considered pretty and for the first time was openly pursued by boys I actually liked (as opposed to being surreptitiously pinched and obscenely mumbled at). Which was great, except I didn't know how to handle that, either, and during spring break was caught spending the night with one of these boys in his dorm. We were just making out, but that didn't matter—I'd broken so many rules with such seemingly insouciant speed that it looked to the adults as though I'd lost my mind. And I was expelled.

In the midst of all this, my relationship with Sandrine was no longer central. I talked with her about some of what was happening, but it was hard to translate it into our shared language. Intuiting her likely sarcastic response, I skipped the druggy mysticism, and she seemed at least interested in (if a bit skeptical about) what I chose to share. So it was a shock when, on my arrival back home, she exploded in anger and disappointment at me. I was no longer the person she knew. My inexplicable transformation into a weird hippie thing seemed so crazy or so fake, and, either way, so destructive, that she could no longer be my friend. (My girl-jock pal told me that Sandrine had only pretended to forgive me for stealing her stuff, that she'd been gossiping about me mightily. Even then, I found it impossible to blame her. Really, what else could I expect?) Shortly after that, my parents decided to commit me to a mental institution, and I, in response, ran away from home. By then, I was dealing with too much to think or feel a lot about Sandrine and what had happened between us.

But I did not forget her. Ever. Despite the traumatic way in which the friendship had ended, she continued to occupy an oasis in my psyche, a place of potency and beauty. More than five decades later, I still credit her with expanding my vision of the world at a key time, in a way that was actually formative. When I once described the relationship to an acquaintance, she asked, somewhat incredulously, "But didn't you always resent her?" I understood the question; it would be natural to resent someone who so eclipsed you, even if you liked her a whole bunch. But I think I didn't resent her because I didn't have time to really get there. Even a year after we'd met, I was still in a kind of honeymoon period with her, and then the friendship ended, not with slow-moving disillusion but with an act of betrayal on my part. If my parents hadn't decided to send me away, it would all have played out very differently: for one thing, I never would have stolen my friend's clothes, because I would not have had any place to wear them. If I had stayed in my drab local high school, I would have been miserable, but I probably would not have been kicked out, and my parents would not have wanted to hospitalize me, nor would I have run away. Eventually, Sandrine would almost certainly have wanted friends who were better matched to her, girls with more style and social prowess. Even if she was loyal enough to keep me in her orbit, I would have felt sidelined and rejected, not in one shocking moment but on a daily basis. In that case, the envy I had just begun to feel might have grown bitter and poisonous; my adoration could have become real hate, combined with shame.

A frightening scenario! Though not an inevitable one. Perhaps with more time we would have grown into a relationship not unlike the one described in "My Brilliant Friend," in which I would have compensated for my lack of great beauty and glamour with a positive focus on achievement. Maybe we could have worked it out, as countless other girls must have. Instead, the boil was exposed and lanced by my embarrassing yet perversely assertive theft, and, in the aftermath, Sandrine became fixed in my mind as an ideal, one that I continued to seek in the form of friends with a magnetic combination of beauty, brilliance, and depth. These friendships were often suffused with romance and dramatic melancholy; they lit up my imagination much as Sandrine had.

But it was never like what I'd felt with *her*, the original—a feeling so



strong and desperate that it inspired me to steal. I'm not sure why this was. It could be that the original experience had been searing to the point of cauterizing, that, like my mother with her defensive modesty, I just never allowed myself to go there again. It could be that, having gained a little more maturity, I came to understand that beautiful women are not ideals, that they, like everyone else, suffer from heartbreak, self-doubt, disappointment, and, eventually, illness and age, that their beauty, however electrifying, does not grant them immunity to any of it. And then they have to put up with all the terrible envy—an experience that I eventually came to know from the receiving end.

Sandrine and I crossed paths twice again. The first time was when I had just started at a four-year college and she was already in graduate school. One day, she walked into a coffee shop where I was working; I was excited to see her and eager to reconnect. She was less eager and perhaps even wary of me. Some days later, we had an awkward lunch, during which I apologized for and tried to explain the theft of her clothes. She was gracious but did not return my calls afterward; then she left town.

The second time occurred in 1997, right after my third book, a collection of stories, came out. I was giving a public reading, and at the end of it a tall, good-looking man handed me a sealed letter. It was a poignant shock to discover that it was from Sandrine, to whom he was married. It started as a third-person story about two adolescent girls walking home together, making fun of something that another kid had said or done in school that day, then huddling together writing journals, which they then shared. To my surprise, I was described as a formidable character "graced with a cruelly dead-on wit," while she, in a wild example of distorted self-image, depicted herself as a vision of "unwitting kitschy pathos." The letter then transitioned to a first-person narrative that flashed forward and relayed her astonishment at hearing that I was a published writer, which she wryly contrasted with her own career writing ad copy. She intimated that, on reading my first book, she'd been jealous and even disappointed to discover that she really liked it. Then she made a joke that I could not help taking seriously: she said she sometimes felt that I'd stolen her "literary talent" coupons. Which she then connected to how I'd stolen her clothes. Still using a light tone, she wrote at some length about how weird it had been to realize that her things were missing and how hurt she'd been when she realized that I had taken them.

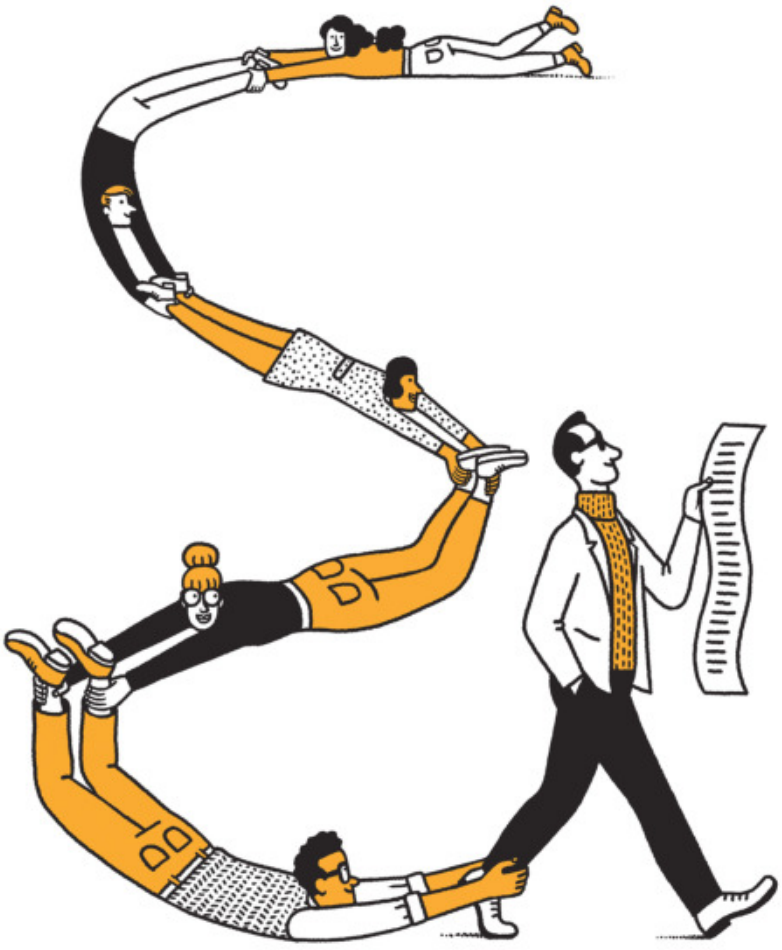
This was probably the first time that I considered how it would feel to have your clothes snatched from your closet by your best friend right before that friend skipped off to crazy glamour land—that is, lonely. You would feel very alone. It was also the first time that I considered how difficult it may have been for her, at that age, to be possessed of such rare, precocious beauty—powerful, yes, maybe even thrilling, but also a lot to deal with in terms of other people's reactions. To idealize is finally to objectify, and sometimes admiration can feel cold. Like me, she had probably wanted warmth and support in a friend.

Sandrine ended the letter with a handwritten note saying that she loved my work and related to it. She asked about my family. She gave me her phone number and address; she plainly wanted to reconnect. I wrote back to her. I don't remember what I said. I'm pretty sure that I apologized again for the theft. I hope I told her how important our friendship had been to me. I hope I told her that I had loved her. But, whatever I wrote, I didn't give her my phone number or even put my return address on the envelope. Ironically, her expression of envy had scared me. I had at that point in my life experienced professional envy from people who always seemed to imagine that I was much more successful and affluent than I was; I had experienced the aggression that such envy can engender, and it had not been fun. And it was painful to be reminded that I had once been envious enough to steal from a close friend who trusted me. Perhaps I didn't want a relationship that had that moment as part of its foundational story. In any case, although I wrote back fulsomely, I chose not to be in touch.

"Men compete about what they *do;* women compete about what they *are*." But those categories can blur; who you *are* can dictate what you *do*, albeit by various and incomplete means, dependent on context, choice, and circumstance, including how you are seen by others. You can come in second or third or fourth or fifth place in a hundred different endeavors and still feel, if enough people love you, that you are a good and valuable person. If you're, say, funny, generous, and loving, you might even be considered a superlative person without winning a single official competition. But how can you feel anything but bad, or at least anxious, if you are unofficially competing over how loving or generous you might be? Or competing over the shape of your body or your facial dimensions? Over subjective traits such as likability, even lovability? And yet most of us do compete over such intangibles at one time or another. It seems built in: siblings compete over who is most loved (or approved of, which is different) by their parents. My sisters and I certainly did, no matter how earnestly we were taught not to.

Sandrine and I had not yet begun to compete in that intimate way, but I probably sensed it coming and didn't think I would stand a chance. The envy I felt for her *was* about who we were, as well as about our perceived value as girls. I fixed on her clothes because they were the most tangible element of her dynamism, her force. Being around Sandrine roused my own nascent force; that was likely a big part of what made me love her company. But I saw no outlet for the intensity of that force, no acceptable expression of it. I had to leave home to find that, and eventually I did.

Rereading Sandrine's hand-delivered letter, I now wish that I hadn't taken her joke about talent coupons so seriously. I wish I had replied more generously. In spite of everything, I believe that we had quite an affinity. And I really wonder what she would have to say about all of this. ♦



LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

MY WAITING LIST

BY JACK HANDEY

I am happy to announce that I have opened a new waiting list, for people who have been trying to get on my regular waiting list. When and if there are openings on the regular list, those on the new list will be eligible to move into one of the open slots, after paying a transfer fee.

The new list is meant as an accommodation for people who have been unable to get on my regular waiting list, or even to get a response from me. It is my wish to give these applicants a glimmer of hope.

However, I must confess, openings on my regular waiting list are few and far between. But they do occasionally happen:

—Persons on the regular list are required to notify me at least once a month that they wish to remain on the waiting list. Failure to do so can result in removal, and a fine.

—Some new applicants for the waiting list fail to completely fill out the nine-page background check. Or they get it witnessed and notarized, but forget to submit the full set of fingerprints and a urine sample.

—Grounds for automatic expulsion is asking what the waiting list is for.

Under my bylaws, persons dropped from the list can apply to be reinstated. All they have to do is submit a new six-part application, along with a video in which they explain why they didn't follow the rules. Plus pay a fee.

Long ago, there was no need for waiting lists. You could just march right in, slap down a sawbuck, and shout, "Gimme all you got!" And they would. But try that nowadays and the guy will laugh derisively, then pick up your sawbuck between his thumb and index finger, like a piece of filth, and hand it back to you. Then he'll put you on a waiting list to be pummelled.

When I first started my waiting list, it was nothing more than a few fake names scribbled on a yellow notepad. I couldn't get anyone real to join it. Even my so-called friend Don declined. My wife told me I was crazy. Then I caught a lucky break. The famous actor Cameron Hormel signed up. (He's not famous anymore.) After that, my waiting list grew and grew, and along the way I picked up three Listy Awards and a new trophy wife.

You're supposed to keep it secret if you get on my waiting list, but one way you can tell that someone is on it is if the person suddenly develops a haughty British accent. Some people proclaim that they don't even *want* to be on my list. Nice try, but that won't get you on the list.

Young people today have no interest in starting a waiting list. They would rather sit in their parents' basement and play video games. And that's fine by me, because my video game, Jack's Waiting List, is No. 1 in sales. In the game, you go on a dangerous quest to get on my waiting list; it involves slaying ogres and demons and other applicants. You are tempted by false lists. At last you arrive at the castle that holds the True Waiting List.

Some people lament the number of waiting lists these days, for everything from getting brain surgery to meeting the Pope. But being on my waiting list is a source of pride that you can take to your grave. It gives you peace of mind. Despite all the uncertainties of life, you can sit in your rocking chair on the front porch, take a puff from your pipe, and smile, knowing that you have a secure spot on my list, unless you don't pay your dues. ♦

LETTER FROM LONDON

THE OLIGARCH'S SON

Following a mysterious plunge into the Thames, two grieving parents reckon with the anatomy of a fall.

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

After Zac Brettler died, his parents struggled to decode the mystery of what had happened to him. They thought that they could pinpoint the moment he'd started to change: three years earlier, when, at sixteen, he began boarding at Mill Hill School, in North London. Zac had grown up in Maida Vale, a quietly affluent neighborhood in the city. His father, Matthew, is a director at a small financial-services firm; his mother, Rachelle, is a freelance journalist. As a child, Zac was bright and quirky, with curly red hair and a voice that was husky and surprisingly deep. He was an excellent mimic, and often entertained his parents and his brother, Joe, by putting on accents. Joe was nearly two years older than Zac, and he attended University College School, an élite day school in Hampstead. But when Zac took the University College entrance exam he struggled with the math portion, and wasn't admitted. He was clearly intelligent and creative, but he was less of a student than Joe, and after applying unsuccessfully to two other schools he enrolled at Mill Hill, as a day student, at the age of thirteen.

Established in 1807 and occupying a rambling hundred-and-fifty-acre campus, Mill Hill has a hefty tuition price, but it has a less academic reputation than its peers. In the bourgeois milieu in which Zac grew up, to mention that you attended Mill Hill could be interpreted to mean that you'd been rejected by more rigorous schools. When Zac arrived, in 2013, he found himself in the company of the cosseted offspring of plutocrats from Russia, Kazakhstan, and China. "It was the children of oligarchs," Andrei Lejonvarn, a former student who befriended Zac at Mill Hill, recalled. The kids wore designer clothes and partied at swank hotels. On cold days, rather than make the eight-minute walk from the dormitory to class, they summoned Ubers. Because London is a second home to so many rich people from abroad, the city has long been a bastion of gaudy consumerism. To Zac, his classmates' ostentatiousness seemed exotic; his parents weren't especially materialistic. Rachelle told me, "This world of Porsches and cosmetic surgery and Ibiza, it's everything we're not." Once, an administrator called the Brettlers' home to say that Zac had just left school in a chauffeured limousine. Zac confessed to his parents that he'd paid for this extravagance himself. "I wanted to see what it would feel like," he said.

The commute from Maida Vale to Mill Hill took nearly an hour, so Zac began boarding during the week. To his parents, he seemed relatively well adjusted. He got decent grades and excelled at tennis and cricket. Occasionally, he brought friends home, and they appeared to be nice kids. But Zac was becoming more fixated on wealth. He'd been interested in cars since childhood, and now expressed embarrassment at his family's humble Mazda. Like many adolescent boys, he developed a fascination with gangsters, watching documentaries about figures from the London underworld, among them the homicidal twins Reginald and Ronald Kray. He loved movies about guys on the make, such as "The Wolf of Wall Street" and "War Dogs," which tells the true story of two young men in Florida who became international arms dealers.

By 2018, Zac had tired of boarding, and for his final year of high school he transferred to Ashbourne College, in Kensington, because it was closer to home. He still had a baby face, with unblemished skin and flushed cheeks, but he carried himself like an adult. He wore a Moncler vest to class and stored schoolwork in a briefcase. He talked to his parents about business deals—selling cars and high-end properties—that he was supposedly involved in. They didn't know how seriously to take these claims. Was their son precocious or playacting? Zac had always been congenial and a quick study, and these qualities, they figured, might well equip him to become a young entrepreneur. In any case, the Brettlers didn't want to discourage their son—or, worse, push him away. Even if they were dubious of his desire for wealth and glamour, they tried to be gently supportive.

In early 2019, as Zac was finishing up high school, he told his parents that he'd become friends with Akbar Shamji, a wealthy businessman in his forties who lived and worked in Mayfair, one of London's poshest districts. Shamji had a big, beautiful dog, a black Weimaraner named Alpha Nero, and Zac sometimes visited Shamji's flat, on Mount Street, and took Alpha Nero for a walk. Rachelle sensed that Zac enjoyed the feeling of strolling alone through Mayfair alongside this elegant, obviously expensive animal, as if it were his own. But he was no mere errand boy for Shamji. Indeed, he told his parents that they'd become business partners and were discussing various deals, from launching a line of CBD-infused skin-care products to investing in a mine in Kazakhstan. Zac incorporated a company, Omega Stratton, which was described in a public filing, obliquely, as engaging in "security and commodity contracts." He occasionally e-mailed his family from his business account. For a month or so in the summer of 2019, Zac even moved into a luxury flat in Pimlico, in a new development called Riverwalk, which was right on the Thames, near Vauxhall Bridge. It wasn't clear if he had a roommate—he wouldn't let Matthew and Rachelle visit—but on a video chat he showed them the apartment's sleek interior. Zac had received admission offers from several universities, but he was now thinking of skipping college. He told his parents that he was earning enough from his assorted ventures to afford the rent at Riverwalk, though by the end of the summer he'd

Balconies overlooking the Thames at the Riverwalk complex, where Zac Brettler spent his final night.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEWIS KHAN

moved back home, saying that he'd been lonely in Pimlico.

Matthew and Rachelle felt mounting unease about Zac's trajectory. He was growing up too quickly, and he sometimes behaved belligerently—stomping around their flat, slamming doors, at times becoming physically intimidating. Fearing that he was taking drugs, they asked his childhood physician to draw blood at his next checkup and surreptitiously screen it. The result was negative. Once, when they went on vacation in Oman and left Zac alone at home, Matthew hid a video camera in the living room; all it captured was Zac with friends from the local tennis club, watching soccer on TV. At Rachelle's urging, Zac was evaluated by a psychiatrist. But the doctor found no clear indications of a disorder.

Matthew's firm is international, and on November 28, 2019, a Thursday, he was in the United States on a work trip. Zac had told Rachelle that he planned to spend the weekend with Shamji, doing a "digital detox": avoiding computers and phones. But that night, in the family's apartment, Rachelle discovered that Zac had left his wallet and keys behind. "I am a wee bit worried about you," she e-mailed him. "You have left your jacket and coat and credit cards here—how does that work for you for a few days?" She signed off, "Sending you much much much love." At 2:03 A.M., Zac replied, "All good x."

Twenty-one minutes later, a surveillance camera affixed to the Thames headquarters of the British spy agency M.I.6 captured sudden movement outside a building across the river. It was Riverwalk, where Zac had stayed that summer. The building's façade featured curved balconies overlooking the Thames. At 2:24 A.M., the camera recorded Zac walking out of a brightly lit fifth-floor apartment. He went to one corner of the balcony, then to the other. Then, returning to the center, he jumped.

The Thames is two hundred and fifteen miles long, but the stretch that ebbs and surges with the saltwater tide runs from Teddington Weir, in West London, to the North Sea. The tide was high that Thursday night, but by morning it had lowered by some nine feet, exposing a broad shoulder of muddy shoreline in front of Riverwalk. Shortly after 7 A.M., a passerby spotted a pale body on the riverbed. Somebody called the police, and the London Ambulance Service soon arrived. The body was "cold to the touch and extremely stiff," a paramedic later noted. "Life was recognized to be extinct at 7:36 A.M."

Every year, scores of people attempt to kill themselves in the Thames, often by jumping off a bridge. Many survive the impact and are fished out by rescuers. But if a fall is fatal the body often drifts with the tide. Consequently, the police didn't realize, on discovering Zac's body, that he'd plummeted from a balcony directly above; it was more probable that he'd been borne to the Pimlico riverbed by the current. After loading the body onto a boat, they transported it to a mortuary. No wallet was found in the sweatpants Zac had been wearing that night, so the police had no idea who he was.

Four miles northwest, in Maida Vale, Rachelle woke up worried about her son. She kept calling Zac, but his phone went straight to voice mail. At around nine-thirty, the doorbell rang. The Brettler flat occupies the ground and basement levels of a handsome red brick apartment building. At the door, Rachelle encountered a muscular chauffeur with a shaved head, dressed in a tailored blue overcoat and a purple tie. He had a phone to his ear.

"Where's Zac?" the chauffeur asked.

"I don't know. Who are you?" Rachelle said.

"Who are *you*?"

"I'm Zac's mum."

The man had been holding his phone so that whoever was on the line could follow the conversation. Through the phone, Rachelle heard a male voice say, "That can't be his mum. His mum is in Dubai."

Rather than explain what this could possibly mean, the man climbed into a Range Rover and drove off, leaving Rachelle in her vestibule, feeling deeply unsettled. That evening, she called a police hotline and reported Zac missing. Zac had been gone only since the previous afternoon, but she had a sense of foreboding. Through a friend, she got the contact information of a private investigator. She'd alerted Matthew, who had decided to return to London. Rachelle had also tracked down a friend of Zac's who had a phone number for Akbar Shamji, and she arranged a meeting.

On Monday, December 2nd, the police still hadn't connected the John Doe found in the Thames with the missing-persons case in Maida Vale, so, as Matthew later said, "we thought we were looking for a living person." Rachelle and Matthew went to the Méridien hotel in Piccadilly, where Shamji had suggested talking in a guest lounge to which he had access. Shamji was forty-seven and rakishly handsome, with an aquiline nose and a full head of dark hair. He wore a tight-fitting suit with a busy pattern. Shamji said that he, too, was worried about Zac.

He handed the Brettlers the black overnight bag that Zac had taken with him four days earlier. He explained that he'd spent Thursday evening with Zac at Riverwalk, along with Dave Sharma, a fifty-five-year-old friend who lived in the apartment. Sharma's daughter, Dominique Sharma Clarke, who was in her early twenties, was also there. It had been an upsetting night, Shamji continued. Zac had confessed to having a heroin addiction.

The Brettlers were astounded: they'd seen no signs of heroin use. According to Shamji, Zac had said that he'd been secretly using the drug for years. That Thursday evening, Shamji went on, both he and Sharma had vowed to find Zac a treatment program. Then he and Dominique departed, leaving Zac with Sharma. On Friday morning, Shamji said, Sharma had informed him that Zac had disappeared. "We started to worry," Shamji told the Brettlers. "He's obviously gone off to get some drugs." Sharma arranged for an associate of his—the chauffeur, whose name was Carlton—to look for Zac at the Maida Vale apartment.

Shamji unnerved the Brettlers further by explaining that he and Sharma had known their son not as Zac Brettler but as Zac Ismailov, the wealthy child of a Russian oligarch. Shamji had been introduced to him roughly eight months earlier, by a man named Mark Foley, who worked for Chelsea Football Club, a team then owned by the Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. Foley had told Shamji that Zac was looking to invest some of his family fortune. Shamji said that, until he spoke with Rachelle, he'd been under the impression that Zac's fa-

ther had recently died, and that his mother lived with Zac's siblings in Dubai. Zac had claimed that his family owned a penthouse unit in One Hyde Park—a superluxury development in Knightsbridge famous for its secretive, often absentee tenants—and had described the Maida Vale flat as an investment property where he was living only temporarily, and alone.

Shamji seemed like a credible person: he'd attended Cambridge University and had impeccable manners. Moreover, Zac had told his parents that Shamji had an office on Berkeley Square—a rarefied address even by London standards. His wife, Daniela Karnuts, runs a successful fashion label, Safiyaa, which has made clothing worn by Meghan Markle and Michelle Obama. Yet Shamji's story seemed outlandish. Matthew found him nervous and fidgety, noticing that he avoided eye contact with them. But Shamji emphasized that he and Sharma were desperate to find Zac and "get him back" for the Brettlers. They all agreed to stay in touch and continue searching.

The next day, Rachelle was in the front room of the family home, on the phone with Joe, when she saw a police car pull up outside. "I instinctively knew why they had come," she said later. Two uniformed policewomen entered the apartment. One of them held Rachelle's hand as they told her that Zac's body had been found.

"Hon, do you think it's time you took a break from the light-therapy lamp?"

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In a chill rain last fall, I visited the Brettlers. I'd initially connected with them over the summer, and we'd since had several long, and sometimes painful, conversations about their son. The Maida Vale apartment is spare and modern. Rachelle writes about crafts and design, and the space was elegantly decorated, and brightened by colorful glass vases. A framed snapshot on a bookshelf showed Zac and Joe as little boys, dressed up in costumes at a school fair. Zac was "a cute, fun goofball," Rachelle said. Both Brettler parents are now sixty-one. Matthew is bespectacled, athletic, and bald. He has a conspicuously analytical mind and an amiable intensity, and he has coped with the devastation of losing a child by channelling his energies into investigating Zac's demise. Rachelle is petite, with lively eyes and a tendency to smile even when she's relating a sad story. Joe drifted in and out as we talked. He is twenty-five, with corkscrew curls, and has a casually affectionate manner with his parents.

In the four years since Zac's death, the family has had to confront the extent to which the boy they thought they knew had been living a double existence. Zac had always possessed a Walter Mitty quality: he'd burnish his achievements (boasting to friends about his athletic prowess and his business prospects), or play up his supposed connections to prominent people (falsely claiming, for instance, that he knew Virgil van Dijk, the captain of Liverpool Football Club). But none of the Brettlers had ever imagined that Zac might be moving about London pretending to be someone else altogether.

Matthew said, "Zac was very good at picking people's—"

"Sweet spots," Rachelle interjected.

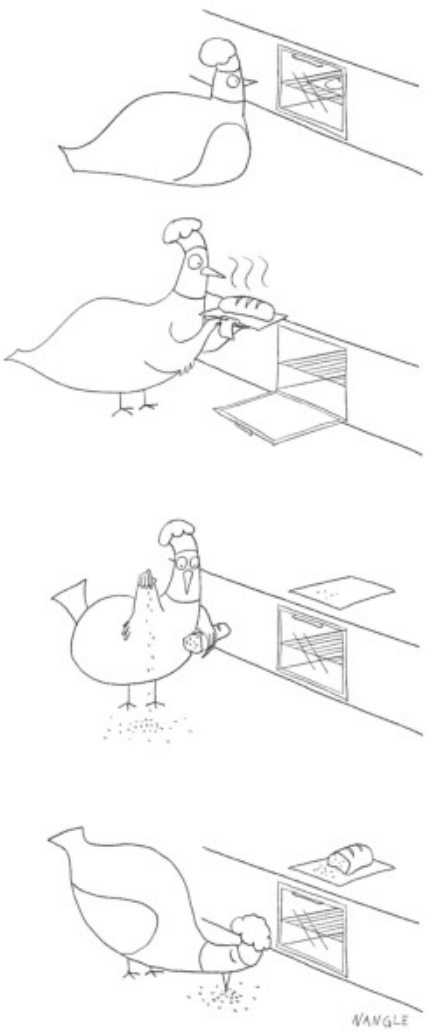
"He was a very good reader of people," Matthew went on. In "War Dogs," one character says, of the movie's antihero, "He would figure out who someone wanted him to be, and he would become that person." The Brettlers recognize now that Zac assembled fabrications like a magpie, picking up strands of truth in one corner of his life and repurposing them as fiction in another. Across the road from the Brettlers was a glamorous Russian woman, a single mother who drove a Bentley. She befriended Zac after he introduced himself on the street, and when she cooked meals she occasionally gave him some of the food. Her name was Zamira Ismailova. "He took her *name*," Rachelle noted.

I spoke to Ismailova recently, and she told me that she'd known Zac by yet another fictitious name, Thaimas, and that she'd believed him to be a young Kazakh who lived by himself. Because the Brettlers' building has a common entrance servicing multiple flats, she had no inkling that he shared the place with his parents. She spoke English with Zac, but he occasionally threw in a word of rudimentary Russian. London is full of children whose families and fortunes come from abroad but who are raised to be thoroughly English. "I never doubted what he said," Ismailova told me. She learned the truth only after Zac's death.

Shamji was right about Zac being a

fabulist, but Matthew and Rachelle are adamant that he wasn't suicidal. He'd never talked about killing himself, nor did he seem depressed. On the contrary, he was brimming with plans and ambitions, all too eager to commence adult life. Just after seven o'clock on the evening he died, Zac e-mailed Rachelle to say that he'd used her credit card to pay for a test to obtain his driver's license. "I hope that is okay x," he wrote. While I was at the Brettlers', Rachelle disappeared into Zac's bedroom and came out holding the overnight bag that Shamji had returned, which Zac had packed hours before he jumped off the balcony. "It's not a bag of someone planning to commit suicide," she said, pulling out neatly folded items. "You've got underwear, underwear, T-shirt, T-shirt. You've got *deodorant*."

When Zac moved into Riverwalk, in July, 2019, he told his parents that he was renting the apartment from Verinder Sharma, an Indian rubber tycoon. At the time, Rachelle did a Google search for "Verinder Sharma" and "India" and "rubber," and found no obvious match. In fact, Verinder was the birth name of Shamji's friend Dave Sharma. In London, he was known to friends as Indian Dave. And he wasn't a rubber tycoon. He was a gangster.



The morning Zac's body was identified, the private investigator the Brettlers had hired, Clive Strong, visited Sharma at Riverwalk. Sharma, who was short, sharp-featured, and physically fit, liked to box, and told Strong that he'd just returned from a sparring session. According to Strong's notes, Sharma said that Zac had presented himself as someone whose "father was an oligarch," and had claimed that he'd clashed so much with his mother—who lived in Dubai, along with four of his siblings—that she'd barred him from their various luxury properties in London. He was therefore homeless, despite being fantastically rich. "I felt sorry for the young man," Sharma told Strong. "I said that he could stay in my flat"—the Riverwalk apartment.

Sharma, the last person to see Zac alive, told much the same story as Shamji: the previous Thursday evening, Zac and Shamji had come to Riverwalk; Sharma's daughter, Dominique, joined them; after a few hours, Shamji and Dominique left; Sharma fell asleep, and when he awoke, at 8 A.M., Zac had vanished. In Sharma's opinion, Zac had been a troubled kid who was "becoming suicidal." Sharma noted that he was happy to talk to Strong, because he was a private investigator, but he preferred not to speak with the police, as he'd had some "bad experiences in the past."

Sharma didn't volunteer what those experiences were, but he did have a history with law enforcement. In 2002, he was arrested on heroin-smuggling charges. He was later implicated in the murder of a bodyguard turned night-club owner, Dave (Muscles) King, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in 2003, as he was leaving a gym in Hertfordshire. It was the first time that a fully automatic AK-47 had been used to murder someone in England. At a high-profile trial, the judge described the assassination as "thoroughly planned, ruthless, and brutally executed." The gunman and the driver were each sentenced to life in prison.

Sharma had been one of Muscles' friends in the drug trade, but they fell out. When authorities arrested Sharma and others in the 2002 heroin bust, the only suspect they didn't end up prosecuting was Muscles, and in front of witnesses in open court Sharma angrily called him a "grass": an informer. Moments after Muscles was shot to death, the assassin called a mobile phone in France, which the police subsequently linked to Sharma. I spoke to a former official who was involved in the investigation, and he said that Sharma was a dangerous person. At the time of the murder trial, authorities had tried to locate him in France for questioning, but he'd gone underground. "I've no doubt Sharma was involved in organizing the shooting," the former official told me. "But we didn't have enough evidence to charge him."

After returning to England, Sharma worked as a debt collector. I spoke to a source who's had occasional business in London's underworld, and he said that Sharma wasn't afraid to exert his will through physical force. Stories circulated about Indian Dave hunting down people who owed money and dangling them off rooftops. When Clive Strong, the detective, visited him at the Riverwalk flat, he wanted to see the balcony. Sharma flicked a switch on the wall, the glass door slid open, and they stepped out and looked at the Thames. Strong made a note of the fact that the glass door was opened and closed from inside the apartment.

On December 5, 2019, two days after Zac's body had been identified, Dave Sharma and Akbar Shamji were arrested and questioned. Sharma refused to talk to the police, but he provided a handwritten statement saying that on the night in question he'd passed out at about 12:30 A.M., having become "heavily intoxicated" after drinking Jack Daniel's and taking a sedative. Before he woke up at 8 A.M., he said, Zac must have killed himself by jumping off the balcony. "I was not responsible," Sharma added. "I am still very upset about this."

Because the authorities didn't initially make a connection to the Riverwalk building when they discovered Zac's body, police didn't enter Sharma's apartment until four days after the fall. When two officers inspected the place, they found it "immaculate," one said. On the balcony's glass safety partition, right around where

Zac had jumped, they noticed an area that appeared to have been recently wiped clean, though they couldn't tell what might have been cleaned off. One officer asked Sharma if he remembered whether the balcony doors were open or closed when he got up that morning. Closed, he said.

Sharma had some visible injuries—a cut on the bridge of his nose, another between his right thumb and forefinger—but the officers' report doesn't indicate that they asked how he acquired them. As the investigators scanned the floor, they noticed something: the back of a "burner"-type phone that had belonged to Zac had fallen into the track for the sliding balcony door. They found the front part under a sofa. The phone had evidently broken in two, suggesting that it had hit the floor with force.

When a pathologist examined Zac's body, he found no trace of heroin. A forensic investigation determined that Zac had nearly made it clean into the Thames, but his hip had clipped the low stone river wall. He had a compound fracture of his left elbow, probably from hitting the water. The pathologist also noted an injury that couldn't as readily be attributed to the fall: Zac's jaw was broken on the right side.

The most dramatic revelations came when the investigators examined the phones of Shamji and Sharma. Interestingly, Shamji had deleted his WhatsApp exchanges with Sharma in the weeks before Zac's death. But Sharma had taken no such precautions, so Shamji's messages were visible on his phone. The police cross-referenced this data with CCTV footage from cameras around the Riverwalk complex, which allowed them to reconstruct the movements and the communications of both men that night.

Shortly after 9 P.M., cameras captured Zac and Shamji parking Shamji's red Mercedes outside Riverwalk. Accompanied by Alpha Nero, Shamji's dog, they went up to Apartment 504. A couple of hours later, Sharma's daughter, Dominique, parked in an underground garage and also entered the flat. At 1:25 A.M., Shamji and Dominique left with Alpha Nero. They descended to the garage and talked in Dominique's car until 1:56, when she dropped Shamji and the dog off at the Mercedes, and both cars drove away.

Sharma had lied about going to sleep for the night at 12:30 A.M. At 2:12—nine minutes after Zac e-mailed "All good x" to Rachelle—Sharma telephoned Shamji from the apartment. Shamji was on his way back to Mayfair, and they spoke for nine minutes. But something must have alarmed Shamji, because he turned around and drove back to Riverwalk. At 2:24, the camera on the M.I.6 building captured Zac's plunge. The footage—shot from a considerable distance, at night—is grainy, but he is clearly alone on the balcony. Nobody pushes Zac, in other words. But, just after the jump, the footage appears to show the silhouette of someone moving around the apartment.

Two minutes after Zac hit the river, Sharma telephoned Dominique. The call lasted three and a half minutes. Then, at 2:34 A.M., Shamji's Mercedes reappears on the CCTV. He goes up to Apartment 504, Alpha Nero still by his side. After twenty minutes, he leaves the building, heads back to his car, and loads in his dog. But, rather than get in himself, Shamji walks around to the other side of the building, where a promenade runs along the Thames. According to subsequent police testimony, this is what happens next: "Mr. Shamji is then seen to look over the river wall in directly the spot that Zac has fallen into." The wall is about four feet high, and Shamji cranes his torso over it, peering down into the water. Then he straightens, returns to his Mercedes, and drives away.

London is so beautiful that it can be easy to forget that much of it was built on imperial plunder. This dissonance between the veneer of refinement and the sinister forces pulsing beneath has become especially stark in recent decades, as the United Kingdom, stripped of its empire, has found a new role as a commodious base for global kleptocrats. In the recent book "Butler to the World: How Britain Helps the World's Worst People Launder Money, Commit Crimes, and Get Away with Anything," Oliver Bullough explains that a combination of lax regulation, permissive law enforcement, plaintiff-friendly libel laws, discreet accountants, unscrupulous attorneys, deluxe real estate, and venerable schools has turned London into a mecca for moneyed reprobates—a modern-day Casablanca. The London property market offers countless opportunities for someone looking to park a dodgy fortune. Take a stroll around Belgravia or Regent's Park, and you'll notice that many of the multimillion-dollar dwellings stand unoccupied, their blinds drawn. Here is a safety-deposit box for some tycoon in a turbulent industry; there is an insurance policy for a corrupt minister of mines. London is the capital of pristine façades, often painted in wedding-cake shades of cream or ivory; the city's dominant aesthetic is literally whitewash. As a 2021 report by the British think tank Chatham House put it, the U.K. is a "comfortable home for dirty money."

To launder cash—or a reputation—is to mingle the dirty with the clean, and one consequence of London's new identity as a twenty-four-hour laundromat is that the city is full of crooks with pretensions to legitimacy and businessmen who seem a little crooked. Akbar Shamji arrived in London with his family in 1972, when he was less than a year old. His father, Abdul, came from an Indian family in Uganda, where he'd built a thriving trading company called Gomba. But Idi Amin, who became Uganda's President in 1971, blamed the country's economic inequality on its successful Asian minority, and in 1972 he announced that he was expelling all Asians. They had just ninety days to leave. When the Shamjis arrived in England, Abdul was determined to rebuild his business. He started by shipping Johnnie Walker whisky to Zaire, and expanded into trucking, mines, and hotels. There was a handbag factory in Blackburn and a crocodile farm in Malaysia. The reincarnated Gomba was incorporated in the offshore tax haven of Jersey, and its offices were on London's Park Lane. As Abdul grew richer, he donated money to the Conservative Party. Margaret Thatcher attended a fund-raiser at his home, a mock-Tudor mansion in Surrey, where Akbar grew up.

Abdul's holdings came to include several prominent London theatres, including the Mermaid and the Garrick. For a time, he was even a part owner of Wembley Stadium. In the 1980 thriller "The

A friend of Zac's recalls him saying that someone had "threatened to harm his family."

Long Good Friday," Bob Hoskins plays a London crime boss trying to remake himself as a legitimate property baron. He owns an elegant white pleasure boat and hosts parties on it while cruising the Thames. The vessel used in the movie was reportedly rented to the filmmakers, at what one of them called a "humongous" price, by its owner, Abdul Shamji.

Abdul endured a scandal in 1985 after his principal backer, the Johnson Matthey bank, went under. Gomba owed significant debts to the bank, including five million pounds that Abdul had personally guaranteed. Questioned in court about his finances, he asserted that he had no Swiss bank accounts. But it emerged that he did—six of them. A Member of Parliament lambasted him as a "crook." Abdul insisted that he was a scapegoat, but he was tried and convicted for perjury. "You lied like a trooper," the judge said, sentencing him to fifteen months in prison. Akbar was seventeen at the time.

In 1993, fresh out of Cambridge, Akbar told an interviewer that his father had "moved his Monopoly board" back to East Africa, though the older Shamji retained at least one of his U.K. holdings: the Mermaid Theatre. When Akbar was twenty-one, he was installed as its general manager. Akbar had done some acting at Cambridge; in a student production of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," he played a swindler named Honest Achmed. The Shamjis poured money into the Mermaid, but, according to Marc Sinden, its artistic director at the time, the theatre presented hardly any shows. The family built a new restaurant and a stainless-steel kitchen, but nobody used them. "There were piles of monogrammed cutlery with the Mermaid logo on it, and china plates all still in their boxes," Sinden told me. "It was as though I'd walked into a hospital that was fully equipped, but they'd forgotten to put the patients in."

The Shamjis did mount a brief run of a one-man show about Muhammad Ali, and they paid Ali to visit London for the première. "There were photographs everywhere of Akbar with Ali, and talk of what Akbar had done to save the theatre," Sinden said. "But he'd bloody near ruined it." The show lost money. I spoke to the lead investor, a former boxer named Tony Breen, who told me that the Shamjis ended up owing him thirty-five thousand pounds. Breen suspected that the theatre was "a money-laundering operation." (A lawyer for Shamji denied this claim, calling it "absurd.") At the time, Akbar drove around London in a Rolls-Royce Corniche. When things started to get a "bit funky" with the Shamjis, Breen recalled, he suggested that he be given the car, in lieu of payment. But Akbar objected that the Rolls belonged to Abdul, who'd never allow it. Akbar "was his father manqué," Sinden said. (Abdul Shamji died in 2010.)

By the early two-thousands, Shamji had segued into the music business, operating a couple of undistinguished labels in the United States. In the decades since, he's hopscotched from one industry to another. His LinkedIn page is spotty; the Experience section calls him a "thought provoker." The Web site for a company called CPEC, which bills itself as a leading player in India's renewable-energy sector, features a photograph of Shamji shaking hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and lists Shamji as having been the company's chairman and C.E.O. between 2010 and 2020. But an old shareholder document indicates that CPEC's board of directors consisted mainly of Shamji and two of his siblings; according to other records I found online, another senior executive was Daniela Karnuts, Shamji's fashion-designer wife. More recently, he has been getting very into crypto.

When Shamji was arrested, on suspicion of murder, he was interrogated at Charing Cross Police Station. After the police made clear that they knew he hadn't gone straight home to Mayfair—but had returned to Riverwalk for twenty minutes before descending to look in the river—Shamji said that he'd simply forgotten about this part of the evening, though only a week had gone by. ("If I'd

had a night like this," one of the officers told him in a subsequent interview, "I would remember it.")

Shamji didn't volunteer what he and Sharma had spoken about on the phone call that ended three minutes before Zac's jump. He insisted that he had no memory of any calls from late that evening. Why had he returned to the apartment? To say good night, he claimed. When the police asked him *whom* he'd said good night to, Shamji initially maintained that he'd found Zac in the apartment along with Sharma, and that they'd all hugged before he departed. But, as the investigators knew, this was impossible: Shamji had entered the building ten minutes after Zac landed in the Thames. Alerted to this discrepancy, Shamji shifted his narrative again. Maybe he hadn't actually seen Zac the second time. His memory was foggy.

Shamji was asked to explain the interlude when he went around the Riverwalk building and looked into the Thames. "It's a nice bit of river," he said. "I sometimes sit there." Serene spot, picturesque view—as good a place as any for a smoke break at three in the morning. "I spend a lot of time outside," he said.

The cops pressed: Given how long the promenade is, why had he approached the precise point where Zac had fallen? "It seems a great coincidence to me, and I don't believe in coincidences," an officer said. When Shamji was asked if he'd seen Zac's body in the water, he said that if he had he would have immediately called the police.

Nothing malign had transpired that night, Shamji maintained. Yet he kept behaving like a man with something to hide. "If it's not as bad as it looks, then why not tell us what it is?" another officer said. But Shamji continued to stonewall.

The police, meanwhile, learned about some further deceptions on the part of Dave Sharma. He hadn't slept until 8 A.M., as he had claimed. He was up and texting with Shamji by 6:50. When Riverwalk's head concierge, Ana Nunes, arrived for her eight-o'clock shift, police boats would have been visible through the lobby windows. A colleague told her that Sharma had already called the front desk, asking if there was any indication that somebody had jumped from the building. At 8:10, the front-desk phone rang again, and Nunes answered. "Hi, Ana," Sharma said, according to a statement by Nunes. "Can you please tell me if someone jumped from the balcony?"

Sharma was calling from Apartment 504. If he'd stepped out onto the balcony, or just looked out a window, he likely would have seen the dead body down below. Perhaps he called Nunes to find out whether the police had drawn a connection between the body and the building. Or perhaps Sharma believed that, through some wild coincidence, it was someone else's corpse, and Zac had survived the fall. This might explain why he sent the chauffeur, Carlton, to visit the apartment in Maida Vale that morning.

According to phone records, Shamji and Sharma exchanged messages several times that day. Yet when Shamji met with the Brettlers at the Méridien hotel, three days later, he didn't mention that a corpse had been discovered outside Riverwalk hours after Zac went missing. Nor did Sharma or Shamji alert the police that the victim might have fallen from Sharma's balcony, which would have enabled them to identify Zac—and commence their investigation—four days earlier.

When Sharma was interviewed by police, he responded to dozens of pointed questions with a gruff "No comment." Although both he and Shamji had been arrested on suspicion of murder, they were released on bail, and were free to go on with their lives. To Matthew and Rachelle, it felt as if, after an initial flurry of activity, the investigation started to lose momentum. "They took their foot off the gas," Rachelle said. Some of this was likely a consequence of the pandemic, which set in not long after Zac died. The Brettlers may also have contributed, inadvertently, to the diminution in the energies of the London Metropolitan Police by keeping the whole incident relatively quiet. The death itself was not a secret: "I have the saddest news. Our beautiful son Zac died," Rachelle wrote in a Facebook post. Family and friends turned out in large numbers for a funeral at Hoop Lane, a Jewish cemetery in Golders Green. But the London press, which is insatiable when it comes to the mysterious deaths of young white people, never picked up on the story. No florid *Daily Mail* spread featuring photographs of Zac and Riverwalk; no grandstanding about police inaction. The result was a lack of sustained pressure on law enforcement. And the Brettlers, at least at first, put their trust in the authorities, assuming that the unexplained death of a nineteen-year-old from West London would compel a rigorous investigation.

This faith in the proper functioning of law enforcement and the justice system might seem naïve anywhere these days, but especially in London. In 2014, a fifty-two-year-old resident named Scot Young died in circumstances similar to Zac Brettler's, plunging from a fourth-floor apartment in Marylebone and getting impaled on a wrought-iron railing. Young was a property developer who'd become mixed up with unsavory Russian businessmen. Before his death, he told friends and family that he feared for his life. But the Metropolitan Police declared the death unsuspicious; they didn't even dust the apartment for fingerprints. As it happened, a month earlier, a friend of Young's, Johnny Elichaoff, had died after falling from the roof of a shopping center in Bayswater. Suicide, police had concluded. A vicious killer appeared to be stalking London: gravity. The Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky had died in 2013, hanging himself, supposedly, at his Berkshire estate, after many attempts on his life by adversaries who wanted him dead. The previous year, another friend of Young's, Robbie Curtis, who'd also become entangled with dodgy Russians, died after falling in front of a Tube train. Two years before that, yet another Young friend, the British developer Paul Castle, was killed (again, by Tube train).

In each case, there were circumstances—debt, drugs, divorce, depression—that made suicide plausible. But the fact of so many sudden deaths over a short period of time involving high-flying London businessmen with Russian connections seemed dubious on its face. The press called the alleged suicides a "ring of death," but as far as Scotland Yard was concerned they were just a series of unfortunate events. In 2017, BuzzFeed News published a groundbreaking investigation identifying fourteen men "who all died suspiciously on British soil after making powerful enemies in Russia." According to the report, U.S. intelligence had shared evidence suggesting that numerous deaths being described

by the London police as suicides had actually been murders. But a culture of timidity within British law enforcement, combined with weak institutional capacity after years of budget cuts, had shut down investigations. Some people expressed an even darker view: Britain had become so reliant on the largesse of Russia's oligarchs that decisions had been made at a high level not to persecute London's new mafia class, thereby extending to them the courtesy of being able to kill their enemies on British soil with impunity. One national-security adviser to the British government told BuzzFeed that ministers were desperate not "to antagonise the Russians."

The Brettlers did not view Zac's death as part of an international conspiracy, but they did come to fear that the Metropolitan Police had an inclination to categorize any suspicious death that wasn't obviously a murder as a suicide. Rachelle and Matthew emphasized to me that they harbored no stigma about suicide, and resisted the notion that Zac killed himself only because so many clues pointed to something more nefarious.

They began their own investigation, tracking down friends of Zac's and hounding the police for information, and uncovered additional signs that their son may have been in danger. They spoke to a friend who'd seen him two days before he died (and who didn't know about Zac's oligarch persona). The two boys had gone for a drive, and Zac kept fearfully looking over his shoulder. He mentioned that he might have information for the authorities, and was considering going into police protection. I spoke with the friend recently, who asked that I not use his name. "He was being threatened by someone," he told me. "Apparently, they threatened to harm his family." Of course, it was difficult to know how seriously to take such talk from Zac, given his propensity for dramatic stories. Nevertheless, police recovered an iPad among Zac's belongings, and discovered that two days before he died he had done an Internet search for "witness protection uk."

To a degree that his parents didn't fully appreciate, Zac's career as a fabulist started early. Numerous former classmates told me about his inventions. "He made up quite a lot of stuff," a friend who met Zac at Mill Hill when they were both thirteen said. "He told a lot of people that his mum was dead." Zac probably concocted this lie for sympathy or attention, the friend ventured. As an insecure new arrival at a school that he had not wanted to attend, he may have discovered that compassion can be a shortcut to intimacy—and that many people will open their heart to a stranger if they hear he's suffered a terrible loss.

Zac also told classmates that he came from money. "Most of the lies related to wealth," his Mill Hill housemate Andrei Lejonvarn recalled. Zac claimed that his family lived in One Hyde Park, and that his father was an arms dealer who owned a pair of Range Rovers. Lejonvarn was Zac's doubles partner in tennis, and Matthew Brettler once drove them to a tournament. Before Matthew picked them up, Zac warned Lejonvarn that both Range Rovers were in the shop for repairs; his father would be driving a Mazda, and was "very touchy" about it, so Lejonvarn shouldn't under any circumstances mention the Range Rovers. When Lejonvarn, who'd been expecting to meet a hardened arms dealer, got in the car, he was surprised by Matthew's gently inquisitive manner. "He's, you know, a nice guy," Lejonvarn recalled. He said of Zac, "You could smell the bullshit."

At one point, Zac told Mill Hill classmates that New Balance wanted to sponsor him as a cricket player.

"You're full of shit!" one of them said.

"Zac, you're a compulsive liar," Lejonvarn chimed in.

For a moment, Zac seemed genuinely chastened. "I know," he said. "I'm a compulsive liar." Then he launched into a story about how he'd developed the problem after having this terrible accident as a kid.

"No! Zac!" Lejonvarn cut him off. "You're doing it again!"

When I told Matthew and Rachelle how extensive and long-standing Zac's duplicity seems to have been, Matthew offered the redemptive gloss of a mourning parent. His son, he said, had always had "a slightly preternatural ability to tell stories." Being a boarding student, Matthew observed, is "a little like when you go to college, living away from your parents for the first time. It dawns on you that you're meeting people who know absolutely nothing about you. You've got a tabula rasa—a reset point. You feel like you've got a little bit of editorial control in a way that you didn't previously. I think that's what happened with Zac. Being in that boarding environment with people who had this mind-boggling access to money, Zac suddenly saw a space in which he could create another version of himself."

Another Mill Hill friend told me that Zac would forge quick bonds with people "for a certain moment, and then disappear" as they came to doubt his stories. The friend who saw Zac in London shortly before he died reflected, "If you're lying to your friends, it's a bit of a lonely place to be, isn't it?"

It's difficult to say exactly when Zac Brettler graduated from telling classmates fanciful tales to road-testing an alter ego in the more hazardous environment of adult London. Nobody I spoke to from Zac's high schools remembered him pretending to be the son of a Russian or Kazakh oligarch. When did the charade begin? I recently spoke with Mark Foley, who confirmed that he has worked for many years as a consultant for Chelsea Football Club, managing properties. One evening in early 2019, he said, he attended an opening at the Chelsea Arts Club and got to talking with a young man who mentioned that he came from a wealthy Russian family. They agreed to meet for coffee several days later.

Shamji has maintained that Foley introduced Zac to him as Zac Ismailov. It is ironic that Foley vouched for Zac's story, because he is presumably no stranger to the post-Soviet oligarchy, given that Roman Abramovich owned Chelsea for nearly two decades. "From my knowledge of Russian investors, they're a fairly secretive bunch," Foley told me. "You didn't always get the full story from them, and they played their cards close to their chest." Zac, he said, struck him as "one of these types."

It's tempting to see, in Zac's final year, an echo of Tom Ripley, the sociopathic con man of the Patricia Highsmith novels, who achieves the life style he covets by preying, brilliantly, on others' gullibility. But it's startling to think that Foley could have been duped by a London teenager who'd never so much as vacationed in Russia—and that Zac might have been

so reckless as to attempt this trick on precisely the sort of oligarch-adjacent Londoner poised to see through it.

Last December, I wrote to Akbar Shamji. "Zac's death is an event which I do not wish to talk about," he responded, declining to speak by phone or to meet in person. When I pressed, he wrote that Zac "had built an extraordinary web of lies," and intimated that it would be insensitive of me to dredge up this sad story, saying that he didn't "feel comfortable" taking Zac's "parents deeper into these wounds." But in subsequent weeks I e-mailed Shamji various questions, and he replied. His answers were slippery, and he outright ignored many difficult questions, but he was unfailingly, almost ostentatiously, polite.

In early 2019, he told me, he was working with a friend and occasional business partner, John Connies-Laing, on a real-estate project in Lisbon. They needed financing, and Foley offered to introduce them to his new friend Zac. When I asked Shamji if he'd bothered to Google Zac's name before the meeting, he responded, "Personal introductions in London are far more trusted than social media, particularly with Eastern Europeans who have to keep a lower profile." When I asked Connies-Laing about this, he said, via e-mail, "Mark was well connected in the Oligarch world and I had absolutely no reason to think that Zac was not credible."

According to Shamji, he and Connies-Laing met Zac at a café in St. John's Wood, and Zac mentioned that he'd recently made an offer on a lavish home around the corner, on Hamilton Terrace. Zac was dressed casually, but, Shamji told me, he was convincing in his role. As Shamji explained to police, Zac "talked the life of a very rich young kid—he had fancy watches, fancy cars, planes, all the stuff that is very aspirational wealth in London." Shamji didn't actually *see* any cars or watches or planes, but he assumed that Zac preferred a more understated mode of presentation. As their friendship solidified, Zac began joining Shamji when he walked his dog. They'd meet in front of One Hyde Park. Shamji never saw Zac emerge from the building; he was always waiting outside.

The financing from Zac's family for the Lisbon deal never came through, and the project ultimately foundered. But Zac and Shamji pursued other opportunities together. Shamji was cagey when I inquired about the particulars, but I pieced together details in other ways. There had been a notion to sell fibre-optic cable to India. Zac introduced Shamji to the uncle of a friend of his who had the cable and was looking for a buyer. The three men met at the Dorchester, an extravagant hotel favored by London's status-conscious rich. But, when I spoke to the potential business partner (who didn't want me to use his name), he said that within minutes of sitting down he had the distinct impression that Shamji was "full of shit." They'd scarcely ordered tea and scones when Shamji pulled out his phone to show off the photograph of his handshake with Prime Minister Modi. With a sigh, the man told me, "I know too many Akbars." He was more impressed by Zac: "The frightening thing is, had he actually done some deals, he would have ended up a serious player."

Another time, Zac arranged a meeting with a family acquaintance, Antony Buck, who in 2015 had sold a skin-care company that he founded to Unilever. Zac and Shamji had alighted on the idea of a line of CBD-infused skin-care products. "Investment into R&D is approaching $20mn across two unconnected facilities," Zac wrote in a WhatsApp message to Buck, adding that his "partner Akbar" would be joining them for the meeting.

Shamji said little during this encounter, letting Zac hold the stage, and Buck also was impressed. "Zac was very self-possessed and persuasive," he told me. "He wasn't like someone turning up in his dad's suit." (Buck noted that he took the meeting as a favor, just to offer advice, and considered the R. & D. claim to be sales puffery; he had no further involvement in the project, which petered out.)

If Zac could secure such meetings through his own connections, why go to the trouble of creating a false identity? He may have supposed that he'd enjoy quicker entrée to the business world if he came off as a more colorful figure, and he wouldn't have been wrong to think so: in the circles he hoped to run in, an introduction from Mark Foley counted as currency. Some of Zac's friends told me that he bragged to them about his "Russian connections." He'd hardly have been the first entrepreneur to embrace a fake-it-till-you-make-it approach. But, as Matthew and Rachelle began tabulating their child's deceptions, it became clear that he hadn't merely traded on an exotic identity; he'd also been pretending to have a giant fortune.

Shamji has provided mutually incompatible answers about what he understood Zac's background to be. He told me, via e-mail, that Foley had introduced Zac as "a very wealthy young man whose father had died." In 2019, he told the police that when he first met Zac the story was that the oligarch was alive; then, a few weeks into their acquaintance, the

"The assignment was three full pages <u>without</u> illuminated drop caps, Chauncey."

"It's too late for Greg. The tchotchkes have him now."

• •

father had "some sort of incident with his heart, and Zac had to fly all of a sudden to Switzerland." After the patriarch supposedly died, Shamji said, Zac started playing pauper, claiming that his mother, in Dubai, was freezing him out of his inheritance. It now seems most likely that Zac, in a chance encounter with Foley at the Chelsea Arts Club, spontaneously told a story about being an oligarch's son, and Foley bought it—allowing Zac to suddenly level up in London society. When he met Shamji, he cemented the persona with a fake surname. Zac doesn't appear to have extracted significant money from Shamji or Sharma, but during their months together he did secure free rent, free meals, and the prospect of various business deals. Like many teen-agers, Zac seems to have lived mostly in the present; he lacked the long-term strategic calculus to pull off a larger grift.

If Zac was indeed engaged in a con, it bears some resemblance to the so-called Nigerian-prince scam, a classic Internet phishing scheme. A swindler poses as a prince who has temporarily lost access to tremendous family wealth and just needs a little money to unlock it. Sometimes the ruse exploits kindness: the mark is moved to generosity on hearing of the prince's travails. But more often what animates it is greed: the mark gives money today in expectation of a share of the liberated inheritance in the future. One reason such deceptions are so common on the Internet is that, in the anonymity of cyberspace, they're generally low risk. It's more dangerous to hoodwink people you know in real life.

One point that has bedevilled Matthew is whether Shamji was duped by this ruse or was somehow in on it. Shamji, in his accounts to the Brettlers, to the police, and to me, has maintained that he believed Zac to be an oligarch's son until the moment he met Matthew and Rachelle, after Zac's death. But Zac's company, Omega Stratton, was registered in his legal name, and I have seen e-mails that Zac sent to Shamji using an address that identified him as Zac Brettler. Moreover, Mark Foley denied introducing Zac to anyone as Zac Ismailov, telling me that he'd only ever known him as Zac Brettler. When I suggested to Shamji that he must have known Zac was code-switching between two identities, he responded, "Zac had explained that his father sometimes wanted them to use a different name, because of threats to their lives." Brettler isn't a common name, but, just as Shamji claims to have never Googled "Zac Ismailov," he maintains that he did no due diligence on "Zac Brettler."

"Zac spoke with a mild but distinct Russian accent all the time around me," Shamji told me. But when I interviewed Antony Buck and the man who met with Zac and Shamji at the Dorchester, both said that they were under no illusions about Zac's identity, because they knew his background. In their presence, Zac spoke with no discernible accent; if he had, they told me, they would have found it bizarre. "Akbar knew *exactly* who he was," the man from the Dorchester exclaimed. "He was Zac Brettler!"

Shamji told the authorities that he first met Dave Sharma around 2016, at a gym in North London that they frequented. Despite their apparent differences, the two men became friends. Matthew and Rachelle expressed horror to me that Shamji would have introduced their son, then eighteen, to an alleged drug trafficker who'd been implicated in a gangland shooting. But Shamji doesn't seem to have experienced any hesitation; he says that he introduced them because Sharma, who lived alone in a big apartment, might be able to offer the temporarily homeless Russian heir a place to stay. According to Shamji, Sharma and Zac became close. They also appear to have explored joint business ventures, though when I inquired about these Shamji again shut down. The phone records the police gathered, however, make clear that Sharma was obsessed with Zac's supposed wealth, and seemingly felt that he deserved a share of it. Before Zac's death, Sharma's embittered entitlement grows acute. "I'm thinking fuck this little kid," Sharma messaged Shamji on the morning of November 28, 2019—Zac's final day.

The digital trails of the three men indicate that a crisis was unfolding. Shamji, who'd been in Turkey on business, had just returned to London. He says that he curtailed his trip, in part, because Zac was claiming to be suicidal and in need of help. It seems likely that Zac did speak to the older men about wanting to die. His parents believe that he did so as a bid for sympathy. He was scared, in too deep, and perhaps seeking compassion,

just as he had been when he'd lied as a student. He may have pretended to be using heroin for the same reason.

That Thursday, Sharma pushed Shamji to ask Zac "how much he's been given to live on," also suggesting that they "check his accounts" and "go to a cash machine with his card." The men don't appear to have carried out this plan, but if they had they would have been in for a surprise. After Zac's death, Matthew checked his son's bank statement: there were only four pounds in his account. In another message, Sharma said, "Akbar I want 5% of that 205 million and that's it." When I asked Shamji what Sharma meant by this, he replied, "I had heard those chaps talking about big numbers and big deals. I really don't remember all the details." The messages imply that Zac had enlisted Sharma in an effort to restore his notional lost fortune, and that Sharma now wanted a substantial commission in return. The fact that there was no fortune appears to have started dawning on Sharma the night that Zac died.

The messages also undercut Shamji and Sharma's claims that the evening at Riverwalk had centered on a solicitous conversation in which they and Dominique, Sharma's daughter, offered to help Zac quit heroin. The situation was clearly more volatile. At 10:35 P.M., Shamji texted a friend of his named Mervin Sealy, sounding agitated. "I have just been heating up knives and clearing up blood," he wrote. A few minutes later, he followed up with a voice message to Mervin: "I'm not fucking around, nigger, come to fucking Pimlico and pick up this fucking car and drop me home, bro." He added, "Shit's about to go wrong. Wrong!"

By the time police disclosed these messages to the Brettlers, nearly two years had passed since Zac's death. They'd often felt isolated in their anguish. "I was living on that balcony with Zac, in my head," Rachelle told me. "I literally had a stomach ache for months after he died, because you're having to digest grief."

But, even as the authorities were starting to imply that it might be impossible to know what happened that night, Matthew and Rachelle were developing their own working theory. As they saw it, Zac may not have been pushed from the balcony, but he didn't commit suicide, either. He'd been left alone in the Riverwalk flat with Sharma, who was furious with him, having presumably learned that there might be no fortune to plunder. It seemed harrowingly clear to the Brettlers that there was danger in that apartment, and that Zac had felt he could not escape it by walking out the front door.

One night not long ago, I visited the promenade that runs between the Riverwalk building and the Thames. The lights of the M.I.6 building were mirrored in the water, and traffic coursed across Vauxhall Bridge. I gazed up at Apartment 504, its windows dark, the curving balcony projecting over the walkway. Suddenly, the scenario that the Brettlers had outlined seemed all the more plausible. The balcony's lip doesn't extend far enough that you could jump straight down to the river. To reach the water, you'd have to leap outward six or eight feet—a feasible distance from a height of five stories. When Matthew and Rachelle spoke about their son's final moments, Matthew sometimes brought up a memory of how bouncy and athletic Zac had been as a child, how he'd jump down the stairs in one audacious lunge. If Zac had intended to kill himself, the surest way to do it would have been to drop straight down onto the promenade. It's a long balcony, and he jumped from the point that was closest to the river.

Matthew told me about a conversation he'd once had with a man who attended West Point: "He said, 'You know, the Marines is full of nineteen-year-old

kids who think that bullets bounce off their chests.' It's that sense of impregnability. They don't appreciate danger in the way that a more mature mind does." Zac didn't jump off the balcony to die, his parents concluded, but to live. It was a desperate gesture but also a bravura one, the sort of escape you'd see in a "Mission: Impossible" movie. And Zac might have even succeeded in making a Hollywood getaway—had his hip not clipped the embankment.

The Brettlers are certain that whatever awaited Zac in that apartment was more terrifying to him than the prospect of a five-story drop. And, if this version of events were true, then Dave Sharma would have a great deal to answer for. But by the end of 2020 Sharma was dead.

Riverwalk was built by the London property impresario Sir Gerald Ronson, who was convicted in 1990 on charges of conspiracy, false accounting, and theft in connection with a stock-fraud case; he did a stint in prison, and then in 2012 was made a Commander of the British Empire for his philanthropic work. "Imagine the parties you could throw here," he told an interviewer from the *Evening Standard* in 2016, when construction was completed.

Just as there were no press accounts of the boy who plunged to his death from Apartment 504, there is no report on the Internet acknowledging a second death, a year later, in the same apartment. One day in December, 2020, Matthew was at home in Maida Vale when he got a call from Rory Wilkinson, the lead detective investigating Zac's case. "Verinder Sharma has been found dead in his apartment," Wilkinson said. Matthew inquired about the circumstances: Was it a suicide? A murder? A murder that looked like a suicide?

It was a drug overdose that might have been a suicide, Wilkinson said, adding that Sharma's case was being treated as "not suspicious." When Matthew pushed for details, Wilkinson gave an odd reply. "He said, 'I'm being kept sterile from the investigation,'" Matthew recalled. According to Wilkinson, it would represent a conflict of interest for the people investigating Zac's death to know too much about the subsequent death—in the same location—of the man who'd been their prime suspect. "The police told us, 'You need to give Sharma's family privacy,'" Rachelle recalled, with a tremor of indignation. To this day, Sharma's death remains "completely mysterious," Matthew said. "Was there a postmortem carried out? Was there an inquest?" Authorities have refused to say. (Several former law-enforcement officers I spoke to expressed bafflement when I outlined this turn of events, and said that the lack of transparency about Sharma's death is highly

unusual and not justified by any tenets of traditional policing.)

The demise of Sharma eliminated a key witness in Zac's case, and by the time the pandemic subsided, in 2022, the Brettlers were feeling acute dissatisfaction with the handling of the official inquiry. "I have no experience, it goes without saying, of conducting serious crime investigations," Matthew said. "But I find the approach adopted by the police to be completely mind-blowing." The investigators conceded that Shamji surely knew more about the circumstances leading up to Zac's death than he was letting on. Yet they never deployed any leverage to push him into being more forthcoming. Prosecutors could have charged him with perverting the course of justice in the investigation; instead, they greeted his pattern of unabashed prevarication with an existential shrug.

Indeed, the cops had repeatedly signalled an impulse to chalk the case up as the suicide of a troubled kid. When they searched the Riverwalk apartment a week after Zac's death, they discovered blood-like smears in one of the bedrooms and on a sink—but they never bothered forensically testing them, because they had already concluded that there'd been no "obvious physical assault." On recovering highly suggestive texts, they did not take basic investigative steps to flesh out their implications. The police never contacted Carlton, the chauffeur who showed up in Maida Vale; or Mark Foley, who introduced Zac to Shamji; or Shamji's wife, Daniela Karnuts, who, according to his police interview, had met him at the door when he'd arrived home late that night.

Matthew told me that one of the strangest aspects of their ordeal had been trying to determine whether the officials' curious behavior reflected incompetence or something darker. Arrest reports aren't considered public documents in England, and when the family asked for a copy of Sharma's criminal record the authorities declined to furnish one. When I requested information from the Metropolitan Police about Sharma's death, they told me only that it was "not suspicious." Matthew, after discovering old press accounts of Sharma's apparent involvement in the drive-by shooting of Muscles, wondered whether Sharma might have been a police informant. If he had, that could explain the oddly curtailed investigation of Zac's death. Despite being implicated in a notorious shooting, Sharma had somehow returned to England and not been charged. Matthew told me he'd always trusted police to investigate in "good faith," but their conduct in this inquiry was "difficult to square with that."

In February, 2022, Matthew and Rachelle met with Detective Inspector Wilkinson and one of his colleagues, at Hammersmith Police Station. Matthew recorded the meeting, with permission. When he asked if Sharma had been an informant, Wilkinson said, "I have no idea." If this were true, he noted, it would have been a closely compartmentalized secret. But he gave no indication that he'd met interference on that ground.

The Brettlers had prepared detailed questions, and Wilkinson was clearly uncomfortable with the forensic tenor of Matthew's cross-examination. "We have put in a lot of work into this with a lot of people," he said. At one moment, Wilkinson joked, pointedly, that it felt like *he* was being interrogated.

Matthew asked Wilkinson if police had interviewed Mervin Sealy, the friend Shamji texted about "heating up knives and clearing up blood."

They hadn't, Wilkinson said, because "Mervin wasn't there."

"I find that astonishing," Matthew said. "You don't interview the guy?"

"The trouble is, he doesn't know what's going on," Wilkinson objected.

"We don't *know* that!" Matthew exclaimed. "We haven't asked him!"

Rachelle maintained a more reserved demeanor, but she, too, had been obsessively researching the case, and she was no less affronted. "In the first year or so, we've just been dazzled with the shock of Zac's death," she told Wilkinson and his colleague. "The second year, we're hoping to get a response."

On some level, Wilkinson seemed to endorse the Brettlers' theory of the case: Zac had given the false impression to people that he "stood to inherit an awful lot of money," and "that story was beginning to unravel." He told them explicitly that he believed Shamji had lied to investigators. But the Brettlers felt that the police had a tendency to blame the victim: the message was that, however Zac died, it was in circumstances of his own making. "He'd gone in way over his head," Matthew allowed to me. "But I don't think that means he deserved what came to him." Maybe it was suicide after all, Wilkinson suggested. But the one thing he knew for certain was that he didn't have enough evidence to support a murder prosecution. It appeared that the police could tolerate a degree of ambiguity about what had transpired, even if the grieving parents could not. The problem, Wilkinson concluded, feebly, is that "we can't force anyone to tell us what happened." (The Metropolitan Police declined to address specific questions about the case. A spokesperson expressed, via e-mail, "sincere condolences" for Zac's family. Investigators had explored "every possible hypothesis," the spokesperson continued, but "were not able to provide fuller answers.")

One afternoon in December, I met Rachelle for tea in central London, and afterward she proposed a walk around Mayfair. We headed to 52 Berkeley Square, supposedly Shamji's former business address. It was an attractive five-story building fronted by a wrought-iron fence. At the entrance, Rachelle brought my attention to a panel featuring twenty-five buzzers for different businesses. Either the accommodations were very crowded inside or this was all sleight of hand—an illustrious address functioning as a mail drop.

We headed toward Mount Street, passing the Connaught Hotel, a sumptuous heirloom of the British aristocracy now owned by the ruling family of Qatar. "During COVID, we did quite a lot of biking, and we used to come and bike along this street," Rachelle said. "Once, I saw Akbar outside that hotel, on his phone." I asked whether, consciously or not, she'd been looking for him. She acknowledged that she had been. In the years since Zac's death, she'd haunted this corner of London. "Sometimes I wondered if I would see Daniela," she said, referring to Karnuts, who has reared two children with Shamji. "I knew what I would say to her,"

Rachelle added, her voice thickening, her eyes rimmed with tears. "'I'm Zac's mum. As a mother, is there anything you can tell me about what happened that night?'" (Karnuts did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

Any time there is a death in the United Kingdom in which the cause is unknown or apparently unnatural, the authorities are obliged to hold a public inquest. On December 13, 2022, Rachelle and Matthew filed into Poplar Coroner's Court, a brick building with a grim interior, and walked past an ancient sign that read "DO NOT SPIT" and announced a penalty of forty shillings. They were accompanied by Rachelle's brother, David, and three friends who had joined them for moral support. Earlier that year, the Crown Prosecution Service had officially declined to prosecute Shamji, explaining that, because the state couldn't prove an underlying crime, it didn't make sense to pursue ancillary charges against someone who might have obstructed the investigation. In a Kafkaesque sequence of correspondence, the Brettlers sought an appeal, called a Victims' Right to Review, but were denied, on the ground that they weren't victims. When they requested a meeting with prosecutors to discuss this denial, they received a letter that said, "Sadly, a meeting cannot be offered to you as these are only provided to families who have been bereaved through homicide."

Three years had passed since Zac's death. The inquest would be presided over by a coroner, but the coroner would function rather like a judge, hearing evidence and delivering a ruling. And the proceedings would be adversarial: the Brettlers were accompanied by a lawyer, Alexandra Tampakopoulos, who could cross-examine witnesses. Police officers testified. Statements from a paramedic and from a Riverwalk doorman were read aloud. A pathologist explained that he was brought in after a doctor who'd begun an autopsy concluded that some of Zac's injuries, including the broken jaw, indicated possible foul play. But the pathologist was willing to attribute the broken jaw only to a hard impact. The injury could have been caused by water or by a fist—it was impossible to say.

"Zac was a nineteen-year-old boy who was trying to work out his place in the world," Rachelle said, in a written statement. "He wanted a big life, full of status, wealth, and power. . . . Unfortunately, he was living this lie, and creating a dangerous situation for himself." Matthew also contributed a statement, in which he described meeting, in February, 2022, with an employee from Riverwalk—where, evidently, discretion is a core amenity. The employee recalled that a colleague had actually recognized Zac's corpse on the riverbed, but had warned him "not to share that information with anybody." (My efforts to reach the colleague were unsuccessful.)

"Now I'm going to tell you about the passenger who didn't put their tray in the upright and locked position."

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By this point, Dave Sharma was dead, but his daughter, Dominique, was called as a witness, and testified by video. Dominique (who declined my request for an interview) has worked in real estate in London. "My dad basically was not a very active parental role in my and my siblings' lives," she told the coroner. She had developed a close relationship with him nonetheless, and he'd introduced her to Zac. Like her father, she'd believed that Zac was "from a very wealthy Russian family." Sharma had bonded with Zac in a short period of time, and, she said, sometimes invited him to join the family for Sunday lunch. Dominique told the same story that Shamji had about Zac admitting to heroin abuse at Riverwalk. She insisted that the evening had ended without acrimony, and said that when she left the apartment her father was asleep.

How did she account for the phone call that he'd made to her right after Zac jumped? A "pocket dial," Dominique said. But, as one police constable noted, "this call lasts for 03 minutes and 28 seconds, making it too long in duration to be likely that this call was a pocket dial or unanswered call."

Roughly thirty minutes after that call ended, Dominique telephoned Sharma. He didn't answer. "Why are you calling him at two-fifty-nine in the morning?" Tampakopoulos asked.

"Probably just because I was, I don't know, a bit worried," Dominique said.

She was also asked about a text that her father sent her at 6:41 A.M., more than half an hour before Zac's body was discovered. "Dom, let them know they all better tread carefully around me," Sharma wrote. "I will take no prisoners to protect my family." As Dominique pointed out, Sharma often rambled in texts, sometimes to the point of incoherence. But the thrust of this message seemed clear: he was a man to be feared, and would lash out at those who crossed him.

"I don't even remember that," Dominique said.

When the coroner asked her about

Zac's mental health, Dominique replied that she thought he'd been suicidal. This incensed the Brettlers: Dominique's dubious testimony on the events at Riverwalk should have called her credibility into question; instead, the coroner was soliciting her amateur—and hardly disinterested—opinion about Zac's state of mind. In Matthew's assessment, Dominique's contributions were "bullshit from start to finish." (Dominique, through a lawyer, told *The New Yorker* that her testimony was entirely truthful.)

Another statement came from Roger Howells, the psychiatrist who'd evaluated Zac in January, 2018. The doctor said something that surprised me. Rachelle and Matthew had told me that Zac had become obstreperous and even menacing toward them, but Howells mentioned several incidents of physical aggression. One involved Zac "losing his self-control in an argument and throttling his mum."

This revelation made me wonder, not for the first time, how clearly the Brettlers had perceived the severity of their child's situation. Were they inattentive? Joe Brettler told me that his relationship with his brother had been competitive, and sometimes testy. But, like his parents, he'd regarded Zac as a casual "bullshitter" rather than as a pathological charlatan. Siblings often know things about each other that their parents do not, but Joe had no inkling of the Ismailov persona.

In my wrenching conversations with the Brettlers, I'd been struck by the frank manner in which they discussed Zac and his problems, without any reflex to uphold appearances. According to the psychiatrist's report, Rachelle said that Zac had choked her "more in rage than in earnest." When I asked her about the encounter, she said that she'd been alone with Zac, and that they had been having a familiar spat, in which he insisted that the family should buy a nicer car or move to a nicer home. She told him curtly, "That's not happening," adding that he sounded "spoiled," and suddenly his hands were around her throat. "I'm five foot four, and he's nearly six foot, and I don't understand where this anger has come from, and I don't feel good and I don't feel safe," she told me. After that incident, she insisted that Zac see the psychiatrist, and "it lanced something," she said: he was never violent with her again.

In Shamji's e-mail responses to me, the empathy that he claimed to feel for the Brettlers was undercut by the biting tone in which he sometimes referred to them. "The fact is that Zac was somehow so tormented by them and his life that he would do anything to escape," he wrote. On another occasion, he said, "I know it's hard for his parents to accept how much he hated them and the lengths he went through to try and make a new persona. Finally he couldn't live with himself or his lies."

Zac, in his session with the psychiatrist, said that he found his parents "controlling," but the opposite seems to have been true: the Brettlers gave their son an enormous amount of freedom and trust—much more, they now feel, than they should have. Shamji's insinuation that Zac was driven by hatred for his parents to invent an alter ego and, ultimately, to kill himself is malicious and self-serving, but the tragedy has forced the Brettlers to ponder the origins of their son's instability and resentment. "I've spent my life—my children's lives—trying to fix anything I could fix for them," Rachelle told me. When I informed her that Zac had told classmates, at thirteen, that his mother was dead, I worried that it would be painful for her to hear. Like any mother and son, they had their ups and downs, Rachelle told me. But she was close with Zac, or had felt that she was. On summer breaks, they sometimes travelled to New York. "We would have fun," she said. They'd bike around the city, and she'd take Zac to play tennis at Randall's Island. "He might say that he hated me," she said. "But we had a real relationship."

The star witness at the inquest was Akbar Shamji. He no longer lived in London, and he'd become the C.E.O. of a crypto company, Bitzero. In the spring of 2022, he'd announced grand plans to convert a complex of Cold War-era missile silos in Nekoma, North Dakota, into a crypto-mining facility. Bitzero's North American headquarters would be in the state, Shamji promised at a press conference, noting, "We're torn between Fargo and Bismarck."

When I asked Shamji where, precisely, he lives these days, he was vague. "Work keeps me travelling a lot in the US, Canada and Scandinavia," he wrote, adding, "I spend time in London also." His plans for the crypto mine don't appear to have come to fruition. (Bitzero has a new interim C.E.O., Carl Agren, who told me that Shamji was asked to resign in September.) In a recent press release, Shamji was identified as the chief executive of yet another company, DarkByte, which bills itself—in language so laden with jargon that it cannot be explicated—as having something to do with A.I. (Marc Sinden, whom the Shamjis hired at the Mermaid Theatre back in 1993, summarized Akbar's modus operandi for me as "Big announcement, and then fuck all.")

Shamji's children, who knew Zac, are both active on social media, and Rachelle, with a touch of masochism, sometimes

"This winged toddler is a ringer!"

scrolls through their Instagram feeds, gazing at pictures of the smiling family. There is even a dedicated account for the Weimaraner, Alpha Nero. Of course, social media is just another stage for confected personas, but it has been frustrating for Rachelle to see Shamji simply move on. In one e-mail, he told me that, for him, "the matter is closed," implying that all this was ancient history. Akbar's son, who is now about the age that Zac was when he died, is a successful model. A photograph on Instagram shows Akbar, wearing a leather jacket and a big grin, in the fragrance department of a store, pointing to his son's face on a big advertisement for a Tom Ford *parfum*.

Shamji beamed into the inquest from a hotel room. His hair was long now, and fell around his shoulders. He swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but, then launched into the same tale he'd told before. "I wasn't a chief protagonist," he insisted. "It wasn't my apartment or my drug addiction."

Tampakopoulos said, "What the family wants is for you to tell us the truth. And you don't need to be worried about Mr. Sharma. He's no longer with us."

But Shamji was as amnesiac as ever. He claimed to have no memory of his own texts. One message that Sharma had sent Shamji, at 4:30 P.M. on Zac's final day, said, in reference to Zac, "He's not allowed to runaway now, he's in to do with us."

"That's just the way Sharma used to talk," Shamji said. " 'Us' was like a royal 'we' to him. It wasn't me and him, it was him and the world."

Other answers were farcical. Asked to explain his text to Mervin about "clearing up blood," Shamji said, "It's not like 'blood,' as in out of your vein." He elaborated, " 'Blood' is a more earthy, street-y way of saying 'bro.' " He hadn't been clearing up blood. He'd "been clearing up, *blood*." (Mervin did not respond to my requests for comment.)

Shamji testified for hours, his voice sonorous, his tone vaguely patrician. Sometimes he leaned into his purported sympathy for Zac's parents and brother. At other times, he exhibited mild impatience with the proceeding. The coroner, Mary Hassell, conveyed a similar eagerness to get the whole thing over with, frequently cutting off Tampakopoulos. "I appreciate that Zac's parents have all of these unanswered questions," she said. But only two people knew exactly what happened in the flat before Zac jumped, she continued, "and neither of them is here today."

Matthew interrupted to point out that Shamji had come back to the apartment minutes after Zac jumped. "So if anybody on this planet who is still alive had any capacity to share with Rachelle and me what happened and why it happened, that person is Mr. Shamji," he said.

But this was an inquest, not a criminal trial, and the coroner implied that the Brettlers were trying to get something from the proceeding that it wasn't equipped to provide. To Matthew and Rachelle, who by now had become attuned to the obdurate implacability of British authorities, the coroner's response was maddening: this was their final opportunity to ascertain the truth. After two days of testimony, the coroner issued an "open" verdict, meaning that she wouldn't rule on whether the death was a suicide or suspicious. "I can't speculate," she said. "I don't know what happened."

Although Zac's death remained, officially, an unsolved mystery, the inquest succeeded in stripping away ambiguities around several key elements of the case. According to the coroner, the evidence showed that Shamji had almost certainly known Zac had gone off the balcony, and that when Shamji peered over the river wall he was "looking for Zac." She also concluded, on the basis of the testimony and the retrieved text messages, that "Zac was obviously scared" before he died.

And, in one stray moment, Shamji let something slip. Asked about the message in which Sharma said, "Akbar, I want 5% of that 205 million," Shamji said, "This would be because Zac had promised." He went on, "Zac was always promising huge sums of money, and I pretty clearly told Sharma . . . I told him more than once that I don't think there's any golden pot at the end of that rainbow."

One reason that it's so difficult to know what happened at Riverwalk is that Zac was by no means the only impostor in the apartment that night. Dave Sharma was a leg-breaker posing as a benevolent mentor. Akbar Shamji was a dilettante posing as an accomplished entrepreneur. And Zac was just a London kid, posing as the son of an oligarch. Each was pretending to be something he wasn't, and each was caught up in the glitzy, mercenary aspirational culture of modern London. On a cold morning, I took a brisk walk through Regent's Park with Matthew. He was talking about his disappointment in the official investigation and describing how, for him and Rachelle, the past four years have been a dark journey of discovery. With time, and with endless probing, they have come to understand more fully the life of their son. They have also come to see their city in a very different light. "It's been eye-opening for us," Rachelle told me. "This whole world we did not know about, this underworld that exists on our doorstep." As Matthew and I walked, he muttered, "Sometimes it really makes me hate London. It makes me want to leave."

We talked about Zac's deceptions, and Matthew suddenly brought up a podcast he'd listened to about Bob Dylan. "I didn't realize that Dylan would tell people he ran away to join the circus at the age of thirteen," he said. "I'm not trying to equate Zac with Dylan in terms of talent. But there are a lot of people out there who have created a fantasy existence for themselves, and it hasn't prevented them from operating in the real world when their feet finally hit the ground."

One day in the summer of 2019, the Brettlers attended a birthday party for Matthew's mother, in South London. Joe and Zac came, and everyone was in good spirits. But Zac said that he needed to leave early. He had recently moved into Riverwalk, and he told his parents that later, when they were about to cross Vauxhall Bridge, they should call him. When the party was over, Matthew, Rachelle, and Joe drove north, telephoning Zac on the way. As they crossed the bridge, they looked up at the Riverwalk building, and there was Zac, alone on the fifth-floor balcony, a tiny figure, waving. ♦

THE ART OF CHANGE

Thelma Golden's role in desegregating the art world.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

More than seven hundred people came to the black-tie gala for the Studio Museum in Harlem last October. It was gala season, a time when, on an almost nightly basis, cultural institutions around the city congratulate themselves and raise money doing it, and this one draws the liveliest, the best-dressed, and by far the most diverse crowd of celebrants. Thelma Golden, the museum's director, seemed to be everywhere at once as she moved around the room welcoming Spike Lee, Nicole Ari Parker, Questlove, Julie Mehretu, David Byrne, and many more. Golden, who is fifty-eight and five feet tall, with close-cropped hair and surprisingly large eyes, was wearing a long, sparkly dress. In this world, at least, she is one of those people who, like Elvis and Oprah, do not require a last name. "Thelma is the consummate New Yorker," her friend Elizabeth Alexander, the president of the Mellon Foundation and the evening's honoree, told me. "She can talk to anybody, and she's hilarious in a New York way—precise, unpredictable, irreverent, keen, clickety-clack."

The music, by a band called Hudson Horns, was so loud that it drowned conversation. You mouthed a greeting and pretended to hear the answer, or, better, you got up and danced with the person nearest you in the space between the dinner tables. Golden never danced for more than a minute. She would see someone new to embrace, or to take by the arm to meet someone else—weaving us all into her social tapestry. "Thelma doesn't have children, but she is supremely maternal," her lifelong friend Alexandra Llewellyn Clancy had told me. "She takes care of everyone." The Hudson Horns finally left the platform, and, after brief remarks by the Studio Museum's board chairman, Raymond J. McGuire, and the gala's co-chairs, the microphone went to Golden, whose first words were about the museum's not yet completed new home. "Tonight, at this gala, we are poised on the threshold of a new era," she said. "All you have to do is walk along a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and there it is in concrete and glass, the first building we've ever had that's designed especially for our mission." Wasting no time, she thanked her six predecessors in the fifty-five-year history of the Studio Museum, which is the world's preëminent museum for Black artists, and introduced the painter Cy Gavin, winner of the Studio Museum's annual Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize. All of this took less than twenty minutes.

When the Hudson Horns returned, my wife, Dodie, and I got ready to leave. A wheelchair that Golden had arranged for me arrived, with a young man to push it, and so did Golden, who took my hand and guided the three of us, gently but firmly, through thickets of guests—each of whom wanted a slice of her attention—to the blessedly silent elevator.

I had known Thelma Golden for a decade before I fully absorbed the critical role she had played, and continues to play, in desegregating the art world. Until the nineteen-eighties, work by Black artists rarely appeared in New York galleries and museums. (Two notable exceptions were Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence.) One of the early signs that this was changing came in a series of solo exhibitions that Golden, who was then a young curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, presented from 1991 to 1996, at a branch of the Whitney that was situated in the atrium of the Philip Morris building, on Park Avenue in midtown. She was the Whitney's first Black curator. David A. Ross, who had recently replaced Thomas Armstrong III, the Whitney's longtime director, had hired Golden when she was twenty-six and put her in charge of the Philip Morris branch, with the freedom to do what she wanted.

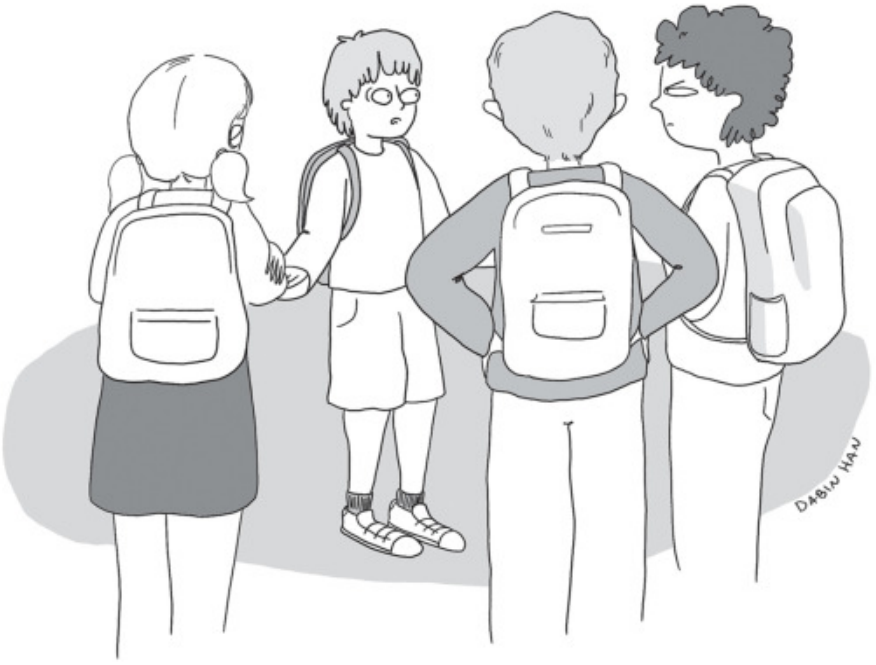
The main museum was then uptown, on Madison Avenue, in the modernist building designed by Marcel Breuer. "At that time in the art world, there was an uptown and a downtown, and everyone my age went downtown," Golden told me. She had come to my apartment on a morning last June, after one of her twice-a-week private pilates sessions. She was wearing a yellow-and-peach floral-print dress, which, she said, was vintage. Golden speaks rapidly, pouring out information and using both hands like an orchestra conductor. She's much in demand for public speaking, and sometimes her conversation can sound as if it's not for you alone. "Contemporary art was downtown," she said, "and I wanted to bring a bit of that to the Whitney."

The purpose of her program was to show artists whom she considered the most promising of their (and her) generation—Black artists such as Alison Saar, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Gary Simmons, and white artists like Suzanne McClelland. She mostly picked artists known for their conceptual work, not figuration—for example, Ligon's text-based works, Simmons's drawings of caricatures with sinister racist overtones, and Simpson's "1978-88," four photographs of braids labelled with words like "tangle," "tug," and "knot." "Lorna was well known at that point," Golden said. "She'd had a survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and she and Glenn were in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, but this was early in their careers. It was also a way to engage with artists who were important to me."

David Ross loved Golden's self-assurance. "When someone on the Whitney staff asked what we were going to do about Black History Month, Thelma said, 'We are not doing anything about

Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, is leading a three-hundred-million-dollar effort to build its new home.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LYLE ASHTON HARRIS



"My girlfriend is real! She's just on a hybrid schedule and comes in on the days that you guys are off."

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Black History Month,'" he recalled. "She just put her fist down on candy-ass projects to show we cared about Black history—either this museum dealt with American art history honestly or it didn't." Ross and Golden both wanted to shake up the staid and almost exclusively white Whitney. Ross added two Black trustees, the Wall Street executive Ray McGuire and the scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to the museum's historically white board, and he changed the whole idea of the Biennial, the Whitney's hallmark exhibition.

In the 1993 Biennial, curators had to take responsibility for their artist choices in signed essays. "They had to put their names on the line, and take the consequences critically," Ross explained. The exhibition's curatorial team, headed by Elisabeth Sussman and including Golden, Lisa Phillips, and John G. Hanhardt, a film curator, set out to catch the new generation's embrace of conceptual art, and to do so particularly in nontraditional forms—with film and TV footage, news photographs, and amateur videos, including the shocking ten-minute tape, captured by a plumbing salesman named George Holliday, of Rodney King being savagely beaten by four Los Angeles policemen. "This video changed my relation to Black bodies, to have it recorded and seen," Golden told me. "The conversation about that really lodged in me an idea of the way in which the representation of Black masculinity in the media had so much to do with my understanding of race and gender and sexuality."

Many critics were appalled. By moving beyond painting and sculpture into popular culture and social provocation, they felt, the Whitney had gone off its rocker. "I hate the show," Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *Times*. Robert Hughes, the critic for *Time*, called it "glum, preachy, sophomoric, and aesthetically aimless." There were many more artists of color than in any previous Biennial, and one of them, the Los Angeles-born Daniel Joseph Martinez, contributed a lapel pin, issued to visitors, with fragments of the phrase "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White." Some guests received pins with the full sentence. What the critics missed was that contemporary art was changing, radically and permanently, from a mostly white, high-culture enterprise to something far more diverse and unpredictable.

There was worse to come. A year later, Golden addressed the racial dilemma head on with an exhibition at the Whitney's main museum called "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art." "That was her first signature show," Ross told me. "It looked at American art from a new perspective—the evolution of Black masculinity from 1968 to the present in all media, from mainstream cinema to the most avant-garde." The show was informed by conversations she had with Glenn Ligon, Gary Simmons, and other artists, and also by the pop culture of the moment, with its stereotypes and caricatures of Black masculinity. "It's hard to overestimate how predominant that mid-nineteen-nineties hip-hop culture was, and the way it was not just being consumed by those who created it but was the beginning of it living in the world," Golden told me. In Fred Wilson's "Guarded View," four mannequins in museum-guard uniforms stood together, all of them headless. "Some of the Greatest Hits of the New York City Police Department: A Celebration of Meritorious Achievement in Community Service," by Carl Pope, was a collection of trophies commemorating Black male victims of police brutality. "There was no way to speak about the image of the black male in an art exhibition without speaking about what was going on politically and culturally," Golden later wrote in *Artforum*.

The critics, once again, were unimpressed. "Black Male," Kimmelman wrote in the *Times*, "succumbs to chic and narrow thinking." Hilton Kramer, in a vitriolic review for the New York *Observer*, called it "completely irrelevant for the artists and those among the public who continue to be more interested in artistic quality than in political outreach."

Golden read one of the reviews and decided not to read any others. "People who supported me told me about them, and they were concerned," she said. "It was vicious and unrelenting, but I did not take it personally."

In a catalogue essay, Golden wrote that the show had been built around five historic signposts, beginning in the late sixties: the transition from the civil-rights movement to Black Power; the rise of blaxploitation films, by Black

people about Black people; the debate about the endangered Black male; the dominance of Black popular music and hip-hop culture; and the pervasive influence of events like the Rodney King beating and the O. J. Simpson case.

The twenty-nine artists in "Black Male," not all of whom were Black or male, brought a fresh perspective on what a group exhibition could be. Golden had talked with many different artists, and what she found was that most of them were engaged in exploring what had come to be known as postmodernism. "My conversation with Robert Colescott was resonant with the one I had with Leon Golub," she said. There was a shared current of thought among artists who were looking at race, gender, and identity through their work. Golub, Mel Chin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, and other non-Black participants had all made images inspired by Black bodies, and their work was often a close counterpart to that of the Black artists in the exhibition, like Carrie Mae Weems, Adrian Piper, and Barkley L. Hendricks. Jean-Michel Basquiat, the outsider whose meteoric success in the seventies and eighties had been cut short by a heroin overdose in 1988, was represented by a wistful drawing of a childlike crown above the words "Famous Negro Athletes."

Henry Louis Gates described "Black Male" to me as "a codification, a statement, a summary" of Black postmodernism, and an important "moment in the development of different histories—of African American art, of American art, and of contemporary world art." The catalogue was as unprecedented as the show itself. Golden wanted a lot of different voices, and to get them she turned to Hilton Als, a writer she admired, about a year before he became a staff writer for this magazine. Als, in addition to editing the catalogue, offered support and advice. When I asked him about the experience, he said that it had been a revelation. "I had never seen a Black woman take up space in that way," he told me. "She did not shy away from her own authority. Thelma's power is her own, and others have been lucky to follow in the wake of it."

The art world is a different place today. Top commercial galleries compete to represent emerging artists of color; auction prices for Kerry James Marshall, Mark Bradford, Simone Leigh, Henry Taylor, and other Black art stars are in the millions; and "Black Male" is a subject of graduate dissertations. Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, recently called it "one of the most important exhibitions in American history."

Thelma Golden grew up in the heart of the Black middle class. Both her parents were born in New York, her father in Harlem and her mother in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Arthur Golden, who supported his widowed mother and his grandmother, started his own insurance business when he was a student at New York University, and he later attended law school. He married Thelma Eastmond in 1963, and the couple bought a house in St. Albans, an area in Queens that was rapidly changing from white to Black. Their first child, Thelma, was born in 1965, and her brother, Arthur, came a year later. Theirs was an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, most of whom "treated you as if they were your parent," Golden said. "It was an environment where I felt a deep sense of security." Her mother, whose social and civic life included volunteer work for the N.A.A.C.P. and other Black organizations, saw to it that her children had a full schedule of after-school activities (for Thelma, piano lessons, ice-skating, gymnastics).

Thelma started working for her father when she was ten, at his office in Queens. At first it was play work, sharpening pencils and opening letters, but as she got older he let her do more and more, filing and xeroxing and answering the telephone. "I would put on my Mary Tyler Moore voice and ask the right questions," she said. "I just loved being in that office and learning."

Her parents valued culture, and took their children to concerts at Carnegie Hall, Broadway shows, and museum exhibitions. Golden started going to museums on her own when she was fifteen, taking the E or F train, both of which stopped very close to the Museum of Modern Art. She already knew that she wanted to be involved with art somehow, even though she had no interest in or talent for making it. She became friends with the guards at MOMA, a number of whom were Black. "That's how I first saw Jacob Lawrence's 'Migration Series,'" she said to me. "A guard told me about it." Today, she has long-standing relationships with guards throughout the city. "I hate going to museums with Thelma," Ligon, one of her closest friends, said to me, jokingly. "It's twenty minutes to see the show and an hour to talk with the guards."

Thelma and Arthur went to private schools, first Buckley Country Day School, in Roslyn, Long Island, and then, in Thelma's case, the New Lincoln School, a progressive school on Manhattan's Upper East Side. (Arthur went to Fordham Preparatory School, in the Bronx.) New Lincoln offered a highly personalized education, and it was open to different ways of learning. It was also more integrated than other New York private schools at that time. The principal was an African American woman named Verne Oliver. At their first meeting, Oliver gave Golden a paperback copy of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," and told her to read a section of it every week, and then come to her office and discuss it. "I think maybe Verne saw that I was going to live a life of the mind, and that it would be rooted in the African American community," Golden said. "She gave me a sense of my own ability to understand the world that I would not just enter but help to create."

Golden met Alexandra Llewellyn in the fall of their first year at New Lincoln. Golden was fifteen, and although Llewellyn was a year younger, and in the class behind her, they quickly became best friends. "We were completely different," Llewellyn, who married the best-selling novelist Tom Clancy and now lives in Los Angeles, told me in a recent telephone conversation. Eight inches taller and more outgoing than Golden, Llewellyn admired her friend's self-possession—she herself had no idea what she would do in life. They had similar West Indian backgrounds—Jamaica and Barbados for Golden, Jamaica for Llewellyn, whose father was an extremely successful businessman. "I thought Thelma had the most wonderful parents," she said. "It was a happy household. You

could feel how much they loved Thelma, and when I was there I was included in that. We did everything together—after school and on weekends we'd go to her place or mine, which was on the West Side, or to a museum, or to Bloomingdale's to look at clothes. After the Black designer Willi Smith came out with his line, we bought matching raincoats. We've been friends for forty years."

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a high-school internship program, and Thelma interned there two years in a row. Every day, she hoped to meet Lowery Stokes Sims, the Met's only Black curator, whom Thelma knew about because her father had shown her an article on Sims. (He often clipped stories about notable Black people for his children to read.) They didn't meet then—Golden was too shy to seek her out—but a few years later Sims became one of her mentors. Sims met Golden's parents, and her warm, inclusive authority helped convince Arthur Golden that museum work could be a viable career for his daughter.

Golden had decided that she wanted to work in a museum, and not just any museum; in her college applications, she specified that her goal was to be a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Why the Whitney? Because the art that most intrigued Golden was contemporary and American. She applied to seven colleges, and her first choice, Barnard, was the only one that turned her down. In 1983, she entered Smith College.

Kellie Jones, a curator and art historian who would later hire Golden, described her to me in a way that sounded like the quintessential Smith woman: "Always put-together, always has the right answer, smart beyond smart, can fit into any situation, one of those people who knows what she wants to do and pursues it at the top level." In the winter of 1985, Golden interned at the Studio Museum, an experience that, she told me, "sealed and cemented" her future curatorial path. "I was so excited," she recalled. "That was when the museum was not just opening doors for Studio Museum artists but for artists generally. It was a place that needed and welcomed everyone's involvement. I knew I would major in art history, but when I went back to Smith that fall I decided to double-major in African American studies."

Golden understood that the art history she had learned so far was incomplete, because art by Black people was mostly absent from her assigned reading. When she told one of her art-history professors at Smith that she wanted to write about Black art, he pulled out a catalogue of Frank Stella's black paintings. (She clarified that she meant Black artists, and he discouraged the idea.) In the academic world, few people taught Golden anything about Black art, but she had grown up with it. Several of her parents' friends were serious collectors, and she had read about Faith Ringgold, Charles White, and other artists in the Black press. In the Smith library, she found the catalogue for "Two Centuries of Black American Art," David Driskell's pioneering 1976 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The library also had a 1973 book called "The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity," by Elsa Honig Fine. "I studied every artist in those books," Golden told me. "I sort of committed them to memory."

Some of the earliest artists in the Driskell catalogue—Patrick Reason, Robert S. Duncanson, and other nineteenth-century portraitists and landscape painters—were clearly influenced by Thomas Cole and other white artists of the Romantic period. Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), the first African American painter to be widely known, studied with Thomas Eakins and painted scenes that depicted Black people, but in 1891 he went to Paris, where he stayed for the rest of his life, becoming, in effect, a European artist. In later generations, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, Charles Alston, Selma Burke, and Norman Lewis forged art careers in America, despite the odds against them. (Burke's portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is believed to be the model for his profile on the dime.) All of these artists were part of the Harlem Renaissance, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, an explosion of innovation in the arts which established Harlem as the creative center of Black culture. Black musicians of the era—Louis Armstrong, Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington—certainly reached white audiences, but it would be seventy more years before the white art establishment took serious notice of what Black artists were doing.

By the nineteen-sixties and seventies, however, more and more of them were emerging, some working abstractly and conceptually, others dedicated to making figurative, narrative art about Black people and their lives in a society that was becoming increasingly mixed. They showed their work at historically Black colleges and universities, and, eventually, in a few galleries that featured Black artists, such as Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown, on West Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan, and the Brockman Gallery, in Los Angeles. Now and then, in the seventies and eighties, one of the big museums would show an African American artist. "Everybody puts their big Black shows on the books, they get their corporate funding, it goes all around the country, it's a big extravaganza, and then it's over," Golden once said, in a roundtable discussion. Recognition came slowly, and often faded. It was not until the turn of the century that Black artists started to receive steady, continuing support from the white art establishment, and it took a dozen years more before their work began to sell at prices comparable to those of their white contemporaries. Most of the artists in Golden's shows at the Whitney have become prominent in a transformed art world where, now that the blinders are off, there is no doubt about the importance and centrality of their work in America's cultural history.

"At Smith, they were teaching me to be an art historian, but I wanted to work in museums, to learn how to be a curator," Golden told me. After graduating, in 1987, she took a one-year fellowship at the Studio Museum. After that, she became a curatorial assistant to the Whitney curator Richard Armstrong, a droll and original thinker who would become the director of the Guggenheim Museum in 2008. "The key thing about Thelma is that she never complained, and she became indispensable," Armstrong told me. She didn't stay long. Kellie Jones, the daughter of the poets Hettie Jones and Amiri Baraka, recruited Golden to help her run the Jamaica Center for the Performing and Visual Arts, a community space in Queens. "Kellie introduced me to many artists, and she let me learn how to manage," Golden told me. "It was

really my master's in arts administration."

In 1991, Golden went back to the Whitney, where David Ross put her in charge of the Philip Morris branch, and later made her an associate curator in the main museum. It was her schoolgirl wish come true. Then as now, Golden was inexhaustible, out most nights, constantly working, as hungry for social connection as she was for art. Ross said, "Thelma was the kind of person who would stay out until two or three in the morning with the artists, being part of the New York art scene, and then she'd show up at ten in the morning, fresh as a daisy. Thelma was an unlimited energy source, and she was just plugged into everything that was going on."

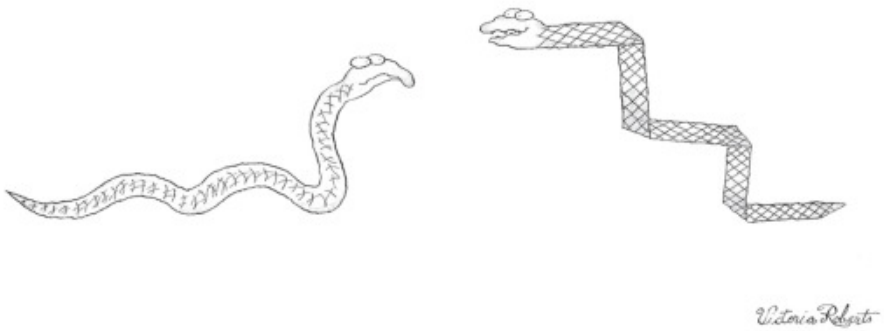
Ross and Golden both left the Whitney in 1998. Thelmaphiles like to imagine what might have happened if they had stayed and continued to carry out the radical changes they had set in motion. Golden curated many memorable shows at the Whitney, from "Black Male" to a retrospective of Bob Thompson, a Black artist whose radiant, unexpected color combinations in paintings of men and women, birds and other animals, and unreal landscapes were influenced by the Old Masters. His brilliant career had ended early, like Basquiat's, because of a heroin overdose, when Thompson was twenty-eight.

Golden left the Whitney, abruptly, while the Thompson show was still on the walls. Ross had resigned to take the director's job at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Maxwell L. Anderson, his successor, from the Art Gallery of Ontario, began to revamp the Whitney's curatorial structure. Golden, whom Ross had made head curator of the 2000 Biennial, found that she was no longer in charge of it. (Anderson claims that he merely asked her to share the position.) Golden felt that she was being given a role with less freedom and authority than the one she'd had before, and, as she told me, "I chose not to take it." She was not alone. Within four months of Anderson's arrival, at least four other people on the staff had resigned. The list included Lisa Phillips, who left to become the director of the New Museum, and Adam Weinberg, who went to head the Addison Gallery of American Art. (In 2003, Weinberg replaced Anderson as the Whitney's director.)

"It felt horrible at the time," Golden recalled. But museum directors across the city—including Glenn Lowry at MOMA, Arnold Lehman at the Brooklyn Museum, and Alanna Heiss at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center—reached out to her. She eventually accepted an offer to work as a special-projects curator for the collectors Peter and Eileen Norton, whose focus was on emerging artists. Six months later, she received a telephone call from Ray McGuire, who had recently joined the board of the Studio Museum, and was heading a search committee to find a new director. He had first called Lowery Sims, at the Metropolitan Museum, who had guest-curated several shows at the Studio Museum, to ask if she would be interested. As McGuire describes it, she said, "Listen, Ray, you ought to be thinking about Thelma Golden. If Thelma was interested, I could be, too." McGuire put Sims on hold, called Golden, and asked if she would be interested in a two-person hire—Sims as director, Golden as deputy director and chief curator. "The opportunity to work with Lowery was really all I needed to hear," Golden said. Sims had been at the Met for twenty-seven years. "I could have stayed there until retirement," she told me, "but it had been in my mind to be a museum director, and I'd never done anything daring, so why not?" She was clear that her tenure as director would be limited—she would step down as soon as she and Golden both felt that Golden was ready to take over.

The Studio Museum, which opened in 1968 to show work by African American artists, worked hard to define its mission during its first ten years. Several of the founding trustees were white, and served on the Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art. The idea had been to show African American art in the context of, and on the same terms as, contemporary white art, but the world had changed—the push for liberal integrationist politics had given way among many Black people to the demand for a more radical politics. In the late sixties, according to Susan E. Cahan, in "Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power," when Romare Bearden was asked to join the Studio Museum's board, he refused, citing his belief that white people were using the museum for their own purposes. (When I asked Golden about this period, she said she suspected that Bearden's refusal had more to do with his already being on the Harlem Cultural Council. She hopes the question of what happened will be resolved in a forthcoming history of the museum that she has commissioned.) The Metropolitan Museum's infamous 1969 show "Harlem on My Mind," which included documentary photographs but no fine art—there was not a single painting or sculpture by Harlem's Black artists—offended almost everyone. That same year, Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, and Norman Lewis started the Cinque Gallery, to show work by Black artists.

Two extraordinary Black women directors, Mary Schmidt Campbell, who led the Studio Museum from 1977 to 1987, and her successor, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, guided it toward what it is today—a showcase for Black art that is also a cultural and educational center, with studios for artists-in-residence and, equally important, internships and fellowships for aspiring curators and museum professionals who are Black or from other underrepresented groups. Dozens of museums around the world



"I had myself flattened. I love it."

now have curators who were trained by the Studio Museum.

In the early eighties, Campbell moved the museum from its original location—on a single floor over a liquor store and a fast-food restaurant on upper Fifth Avenue—to a five-story bank and office building at 144 West 125th Street, which the African American architect J. Max Bond, Jr., redesigned and renovated as a museum. The early-twentieth-century building "was never an architecturally distinguished space," Golden told me. "The ceilings were different heights, never high enough." Initially, the third, fourth, and fifth floors were rented out, providing funds for the museum. Over time, there were many changes and additions—a small theatre, an atrium, a sculpture court. It was never an ideal museum building, but the things that happened in it endeared the place to everyone who went there.

In January, 2000, when Sims and Golden joined the museum, they made a list of concerns that needed to be addressed, and at the top of it was the mission statement, which had come to seem too limiting in focussing solely on African American artists. Art was international, and not all Black artists were American. After lengthy talks with the influential Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, Sims and Golden reworded the mission statement to read, in part, "The Studio Museum in Harlem is the nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally, and internationally."

Another problem was the collection. The museum had been created to show art, and did not immediately begin acquiring it, but over the years it had received many donations of art, some of them substantial. By 2000, the museum had seven hundred or so art works. Sims, working with Nancy Lane, a board member whose outstanding collection of African American art would later come to the Studio Museum, appointed the museum's first acquisitions committee, which actively sought funding to fill gaps in the collection. Today, the museum owns more than nine thousand works, from early artists like Joshua Johnson and contemporary ones like Kara Walker. In 2018, the museum's fiftieth-anniversary year, it received more than four hundred works of contemporary art by artists of African descent, the largest single gift of art work in its history, in a bequest by the arts patron and civil-rights activist Peggy Cooper Cafritz.

Sims and Golden also focussed on the museum's relationship with its Harlem neighbors. "The museum was thirty years old, but people could go to the Starbucks on Lenox Avenue and not know there was a museum around the corner," Sims told me. "Building that relationship was one of our main jobs in the first few years." The Studio Museum began organizing many more programs for the public, one of which, the summer Uptown Fridays!, eventually drew more than five hundred people, who danced to d.j.'d music in the courtyard and the galleries.

The artists Golden had shown at the Whitney in the nineties were now in mid-career, and she wanted to engage with artists who were starting out at the dawn of the new millennium. This led to an eye-opening group exhibition in 2001 called "Freestyle," which Golden described as "me trying to begin the pro-

DEFINITION

All afternoon I stroll the plotless thirteen hundred
pages of a Sanskrit dictionary
with its verbs for holy obsessions,
the name for an alcove
of coin washers whose fingers glint
all night with dark lead, grains of silver

Here root vowels take
an accent at high altitudes

the way dictionaries
speak over mountains

A single word to portray light
from that distant village
reflected in a cloud,
or your lover's face lit
by the moonlight on a stage

Landscapes nudge the dialect.
In far places travellers know
a faint gesture can mean
desire or scorn,
just as
a sliver of a phrase thrown away
hides charms within its grammar

—A guru
"someone with a light touch"
derives from that short vowel, alone
and before a single consonant

Wherever you turn
definitions push open a door

The precisely named odour of a man
who is a heart-thief

a word for the highest complication
during a play used also for impregnation

Attributes of character
link themselves to professions
—a metal worker, the river merchant,
the Commissioner of Oaths,
the census taker of birds who
continues the medieval art
of whistling,

those who carry bees on their arm
like a dark flame,

the sullen recluse
who was once the author
of a prayer

This word for a pool before a temple,
or *a n s a*—"the shape of a shoulder blade"
as in the corner of a holy quadrangle

*

The ancient phrases
give you the coin of escape
—that epithet for those who return
to broken relationships repeatedly
will row you away from confusion

or remain only for remembrance

This is how deep I was lost,
my darling, in a love so narcotic
I possessed unimpaired splendour
having no other want or wish

What was there before
there was the warmth of that word
for your shoulder blade,
or that time before we moved
to a freedom from desire?

—Michael Ondaatje

cess of presenting the next generation of artists." The "Freestyle" artists were concerned with Black individuality, and they went all out to find new ways of expressing the self.

"It's her most exuberant exhibition yet, a hip and witty survey of 28 emergent African American postmodernists," Greg Tate wrote in the *Village Voice*, when the show opened. He also said that Golden and Sims were "performing not just a makeover but a resurrection." Golden, in her catalogue essay, mystified and annoyed some viewers by referring to the "Freestyle" artists as "post-Black." How could a Black person be post-Black? Her point, arrived at in discussions with Glenn Ligon, was that, for these artists, Blackness contained multitudes and need not be the defining characteristic of their work.

Mark Bradford, an artist from Los Angeles, who had worked as a hairdresser in his mother's beauty salon, made his major art-world début in "Freestyle." His immense "Enter and Exit the New Negro," an abstract collage made of hair endpapers used in the salon, introduced his lighthearted, ironic take on identity and gender. He was one of the many "Freestyle" artists whose power and originality registered with the white art establishment, which was now in the midst of an almost comical scramble to represent and exhibit Black talent.

"How many people can say they built a canon, as Thelma has done many times?" Rashid Johnson, one of the youngest artists in "Freestyle," asked me. "Every artist who comes out of 'Freestyle'—Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Sanford Biggers, myself—and everyone who comes after that—Hank Willis Thomas, Kehinde Wiley—all came through a door kicked wide open by Thelma Golden. The landscape that you see today, which is filled with Black creative voices, that's what Thelma built. None of us felt we had to be representatives for the culture. We could just be anonymous critical thinkers. We could just be the artists we wanted to be."

"Freestyle" was the first of five "F" exhibitions at the Studio Museum, all of which showed emerging or insufficiently known Black artists. The others were "Frequency" (2005-6), "Flow" (2008), "Fore" (2012-13), and "Fictions" (2017-18); "Freestyle" was the only one curated by Golden. In 2005, Sims decided that Golden was ready to take over as director, and Golden made "an arbitrary decision that I was not going to curate exhibitions," she told me. Curating and directing were very different, she felt, and she would not be able to give the required degree of intensity and dedication to either if she did both. "It was a profound shift for me," she recalled. "As a curator, I immersed myself in my work with art and artists. Becoming director meant I had to be responsible for the institution. It was like going from high school to college, and, in order to do it in a way that I felt had authority and integrity, I had to stop curating. Being a director really is about leadership, which includes being a diplomat."

Golden promoted an assistant curator, Christine Y. Kim, who had been trained at the museum and had worked on "Freestyle," to associate curator, and turned over a lot of the day-to-day curatorial work to her. Each of the remaining "F" shows was organized by a

different team. Golden's last show was Chris Ofili's "Afro Muses"—vivid, small-scale watercolors of Black men and women, where all the men are seen in side views and the women are in a three-quarters pose or facing the viewer. Ofili, a British artist of Nigerian descent, was an example of the museum's expanded mission. He was fascinated by Golden. "She had a very striking belief in the past, present, and future of Black art," he told me. "It's very infectious. I used to go up to the museum on a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street just to be in the aura of that belief, and to see it as an inspiration. Thelma goes ahead of all the titles that are attached to her. Her height helps—Thelma is short, but you never lose her in a crowd. The clarity of her voice helps. The way she looks at you when she speaks helps. And there's a kind of no-doubt way that she moves around. She's also in touch with the vulnerabilities of life." The Ofili show opened in April, 2005, and Golden became the director on July 1st.

"There is an idea of a director as someone who's always on an airplane, a different city every day, because we live in this international-culture world," Golden told me. She rarely goes to the art fairs that have proliferated around the globe, but, whenever one of the artists she works with has an opening, Golden is there. "With me, what's tied to international travel is an engagement with artists and their work," she said. No other museum has the kind of relationships with artists that the Studio Museum does. Every year, three Black artists, working in any media, are given studio space in the museum and a stipend. (The current amount is thirty-seven thousand five hundred dollars.) They are encouraged to work in the studio full time. At the end, the three artists have a group show. (While the Studio Museum has been under construction, shows have been at MOMA PS1.) There have been nearly a hundred and fifty residents so far—David Hammons, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, and so on. The experience is like learning how to be an artist.

In 2007, Golden moved from Park Slope, in Brooklyn, where she had lived since she graduated from college, to a Harlem apartment four blocks from the Studio Museum, and she's still there. "It has incredible light, south light," she told me during a Zoom conversation—she moved her computer around to show me. "The view makes me think of the famous Bearden collage, 'Uptown Looking Downtown.'" She lives with a lot of books and plants and color, and "not as much art as you might imagine for a curator. It's art that is personal." She didn't want to identify the artists. "I think of this apartment as a sanctuary."

Golden told me that she had felt instantly at home in Harlem. She had come to know Harlem when she was a child, listening to her father's memories of borrowing books from a local library branch named for Countee Cullen and going to jazz concerts at the Apollo Theatre, and when she was older she absorbed the vitality of Harlem life, with its bars and restaurants, churches, street venders, and stoop conversations. It vibrated with the same energy that made working at the Studio Museum such fun. Naomi Beckwith, who is now the deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim, was one of many young curators mentored by Golden. She spent four years as a curator at the Studio Museum, and told me, "At the time, I couldn't think of working anywhere else. It was an incredibly vibrant space, an intellectual home and a social home. We ate lunch together, we knew what was happening with each other's families. Thelma was already becoming legendary at that point—she had paved the way for almost every Black

curator in sight." The staff offices were on the second floor of the long building, and to save time when visiting her curators Golden navigated the corridors on a bicycle.

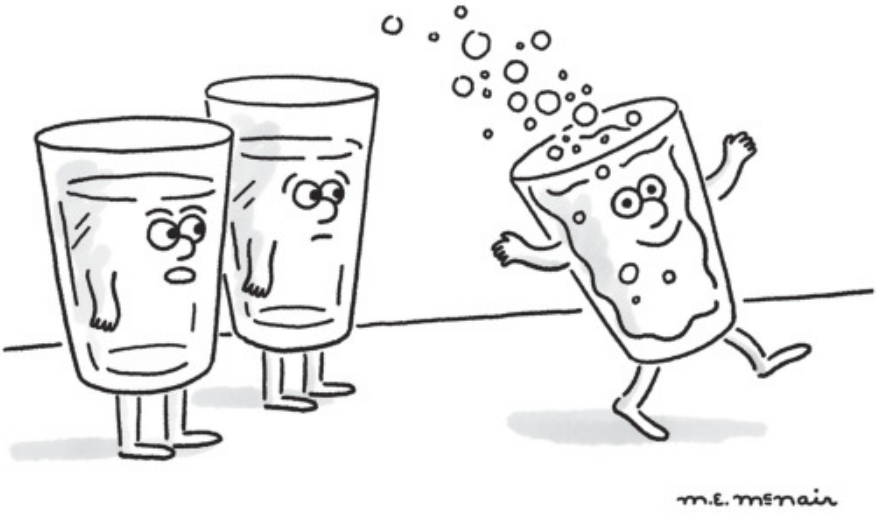
A year before she moved to Harlem, Golden had met Duro Olowu, a London-based Nigerian British fashion designer and curator, and they were married two years later. It was a transatlantic marriage, with Olowu living in London and both of them making trips back and forth. They appeared to be remarkably well matched, and she wore his richly colored, ankle-length gowns to many public events.

Golden seemed to know everyone in Harlem, both inside and outside the art world. One of her friends was Marcus Samuelsson, the fast-rising Ethiopian-born chef who was preparing to open a new restaurant, Red Rooster, on Lenox Avenue. Samuelsson wanted to create an environment that would speak to the culture of Harlem, and Golden was one of the first people he asked for help. "Thelma gave me a language," Samuelsson told me during lunch with Golden at Hav & Mar, a restaurant he opened a little more than a year ago in Chelsea. "She said, 'You are a creative person. Here are other art forms that you may or may not know, and here is my tribe of people.'" She introduced him to many artists, almost all of whom started eating at Red Rooster, which opened in 2010. "We couldn't do this without Thelma," he said. "The first art dinner we gave was for Mark Bradford—it was for a hundred people." Golden loves restaurants and people, and greatly enjoys bringing them together. "The Rooster brought many people uptown for the first time in years," she said, "and it gave me a way to experience the restaurant world which I would not have had otherwise." (Samuelsson has made her a partner in Hav & Mar.)

Golden has always been very ambitious, not for herself but for her vision of a world in which Black excellence is recognized and supported. Impeccably cordial, she has pursued that vision with undiminished focus. "I feel I've never had to protest, because I am the protest," she once told Ian Parker, who profiled her in this magazine in 2002. Golden persuades people by inviting them into her world, and, during nearly twenty-five years at the Studio Museum, her influence has become national and global, and because of this so has the reputation of the Studio Museum. She was recently asked to join Bizot, a little-known but high-powered society of directors of the world's leading museums, putting the Studio Museum in conversation with the Louvre, the Prado, the British Museum, and others in the top echelon of museology.

Is Thelma Golden too good to be true? No one I talked to really had a negative word to say about her. Even

those early bad reviews now reflect poorly on the reviewers, rather than their subject. Richard Armstrong, the Whitney curator she worked for at the beginning of her career, said, "Thelma can get under my skin sometimes. She can scold you if you make a mistake. She has that little edge, which is basically in the service of progress." Glenn Ligon told me that she could be "overgenerous with her time." Her life is full of deep friendships and affection. The artist Lorna Simpson, a close friend of Golden's, recalled that when she was pregnant, Golden said, "I'm not coming to the birth. Call me when it's done." Golden and Simpson were together on the street when Simpson's water broke, however, and James Casebere, her husband at the time, was not in the city, so Golden took her to the hospital and stayed in the delivery room until Zora, Golden's godchild, arrived.



"He took an Alka-Seltzer and now he thinks he's sparkling."

• •

The Studio Museum's building was showing its age. After agreeing, in 2006, to participate in a travelling exhibition of panels from Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," Golden was distressed to learn that her museum's H.V.A.C. system had failed, keeping it from meeting the climate-control requirement. She called Adam Weinberg, who saved the day by presenting the panels at the Whitney, as a collaboration with the Studio Museum. After that, Golden and the board had an engineer come in and study "the guts of the building." The subsequent report showed major problems with the plumbing, the electrical system, and the interior ductwork, as well as with the air-conditioning—problems large enough to close the museum for at least a year. This led Golden and the board to start thinking about a capital campaign. After many more conversations with financial and technical experts and discussions with the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the board took a deep breath and voted to tear down the old building and build a new one. The target for the capital campaign eventually rose to three hundred million dollars. The new building would be designed by Sir David Adjaye, the Ghanaian British architect.

Adjaye seemed like the inevitable choice. He had succeeded J. Max Bond, Jr., as the outstanding Black architect of his era. In 2008, Bond had invited Adjaye to join him and another Black architect, Philip Freelon, in planning what became the National Museum of African American History and Culture, on the Mall in Washington, D.C. After Bond's death, in 2009, the team, with SmithGroup, won the competition to build the museum, and Adjaye was the lead designer. The museum was almost universally admired when it opened, in 2016, and Adjaye went on to become an international star, knighted in 2017 by Prince William, with buildings on five continents and offices in London, New York, and Accra.

Adjaye and Golden were nearly the same age—born on the same day, September 22nd, Adjaye one year after Golden. They had known each other since 2000, and in 2014 they bonded over the idea of a new Studio Museum. "We just had a meeting of minds," Adjaye told me last spring. "Thelma and the board came up with a very beautiful brief, which was basically three ideas. They wanted a space that would connect not only with artists and intellectuals but to the residents of Harlem. No. 2, they wanted to invite the street into the museum—this was really important to them. And the third part had to do with the artists' studios. I've never done a building where the artists are built into the DNA of the institution." He often referred to it as "a living laboratory." He had pushed for the building to have two more floors, but "the board seemed very scared by the numbers. I designed it so you could add to it." Adjaye signed on as the architect, working in coöperation with the New York-based architecture and urban-design firm Cooper Robertson. Demolition of the old museum began in 2019.

"Thelma became my boss, but we didn't let that change the friendship," Adjaye continued. "She's the sister I never had. We have this strange relationship—we can totally disagree, but we never fight." For each of them, the new Studio Museum would be an apex of a glittering career, and a test of greatness.

On July 4th of last year, however, the *Financial Times* ran a long, extensively researched story in which three Black women who had worked for Adjaye Associates accused the architect of sexual assault and harassment. Their accounts were damning. One of the women told the paper, "I felt overpowered, both emotionally and physically . . . There was this domineering feeling of 'I'm going to have my way with you, and that's it.'" Adjaye denied the sexual-misconduct charges but admitted to consensual relationships that "blurred the boundaries between my professional and personal lives." He said that he would get help to create a corporate structure that would prevent "these mistakes" in the future, and confirmed that he was stepping back from some of his ongoing projects. To Adjaye's many friends, it was

an almost inconceivable catastrophe.

Golden has not spoken publicly about the situation. When she talks about the new building, as she did at the gala, she does so without mentioning David Adjaye. "She was David's greatest champion," Darren Walker, the head of the Ford Foundation and a close friend to both of them, said to me. "She saw them as a team, working to imagine, create, and execute this great building for the Studio Museum."

Golden has guarded her private life so carefully that people sometimes assume she doesn't have one—that all her energy goes into her work. She and Duro Olowu separated some time ago, but, in talking with her friends, I was surprised to find that only the closest of them were aware of the separation. Nobody seemed to know what had gone wrong between them. She doesn't talk about it. For Golden, 2023 had been an annus horribilus, both personally and professionally, but the one thing that everyone who knows her could be certain of was that she would deal with the two crises in her own way, effectively and decisively. I couldn't help thinking about what David Adjaye said to me last spring, that Golden had "absorbed a lot of pain" in her life, and "frozen it somehow." The vilification that greeted her "Black Male" show was "a takedown of a young curator who dared to say and do what she believed," he said. He added, "She's stoic about these things. There's a deep, deep modesty, but also a wall of steel. She's a warrior."

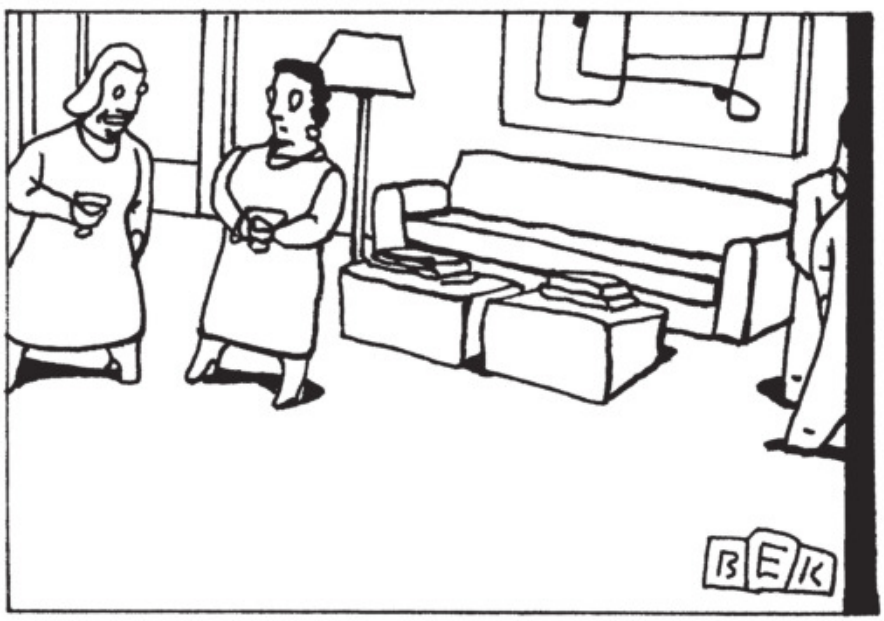
Golden carried on with her tireless schedule. She went to Italy for a wedding; to Brazil for the opening of the São Paulo Biennial "to connect with the amazing Brazilian art community"; to Washington, D.C., for an event celebrating Black artists at the residence of Vice-President Kamala Harris on the grounds of the Naval Observatory. She also attended board meetings at the Mellon Foundation and other institutions. "She understands that Thelma Golden has to show up," Darren Walker said. "There are too many people who rely on her." Above all, Golden made it clear that the new Studio Museum was on schedule to open in 2025.

Some of her greatest admirers are other museum directors. Adam Weinberg, who ran the Whitney from 2003 until last year, has known Golden since she was a curatorial assistant in the late eighties. "I think of her as both an older sister and a younger sister," he told me, half seriously, and then added, "After Thelma became a full curator at the Whitney, I would say that what she did planted the seeds of what the Whitney is today." Michael Govan put her on the board of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which, like the Studio Museum, is now undergoing major reconstruction. (Golden is also on the boards of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Obama Foundation.)

Glenn Lowry, MOMA's director, was struck by Golden's ability to recognize the artists who were going to define their generation, and the curators who would work with them. For years, Golden and Lowry have been having a conversation about bringing more people of color into the museum world. In 2015, they introduced a joint two-year fellowship, funded by MOMA, for college graduates from underrepresented groups who are interested in curatorial and museum work; each fellow spends a year at MOMA and a year at the Studio Museum. When the Studio Museum shut down for its reconstruction, Lowry invited Golden to present exhibitions at MOMA and MOMA PS1, and shows began appearing twice a year. Once in a while, Lowry told me, he and Golden get together and chuckle over the persistent rumor that she will succeed him as MOMA's next director.

On a chilly, overcast day in October, I met Golden at the back entrance to the Studio Museum, on 124th Street. She had organized a hard-hat tour of the new building, and our group included the site manager, the museum's director of public relations, two construction workers, and Glenn Ligon. Golden was wearing black jeans and a stylish yellow-and-black striped overshirt, and she was full of affectionate concern for everyone, warning us to be careful where we stepped because this was still a worksite. We put on hard hats and orange vests and took a battered, creaky hoist to the sixth floor. In the old building, this had been the roof, Golden explained, and the museum didn't use it because the elevator didn't come this high. We came out on a six-thousand-square-foot rooftop with two large structures that housed mechanical equipment. "What you get here is this incredible view of the city," Golden said. The view was impressive, stretching from Yankee Stadium to midtown. "What's blocking the view are the church steeples," Ligon said, getting a laugh. (Harlem has hundreds of churches.) There will be café service on this floor, Golden said, and maybe sculptures.

We went down floor by floor, picking our way around big holes and ob-



"We saw an exciting new bad play."

structions that made the interior seem a long way from being finished. On three of the floors are high-ceilinged galleries and project areas whose combined space will be roughly twice that of the gallery space in the old building. The resident-artist studios are grouped together on the fourth floor; they share a lounge area, which will be visible to people on the street. The third floor was having active work done, but Golden wanted us to see it, and the site manager acquiesced. The museum's expanded education program will occupy this floor, and there will be workshop space dedicated to families, children, and seniors, as well as a separate space for teens. "This is the first room for young people in our museum's history," Golden said at one point. "And this one is big enough to accommodate two New York City public-school classes at the same time."

The tour ended in the ground-floor lobby, which had a twenty-six-foot-high ceiling and tall windows that brought 125th Street into the museum. A massive black-and-white terrazzo staircase in the center of the room—it looked like a monumental sculpture—zigzagged its way toward a skylight in the roof. Another staircase was embedded in a wide, wooden seating area that led to the lower level. "We call this the inverted stoop," Golden said. "You can sit on it and hear a lecture or see a film." All of this will be public space. No ticket will be required to come in, sit down, hang out, and use the café. Ligon's work "Give Us a Poem," which hung for ten years in the atrium of the old building, will be just to the right of the front door. "I really had to fight for that wall space," Ligon said.

"No, no, no," Golden said, laughing. "Years and years of graduating classes have been photographed standing in front of it." The piece consists of the words "ME" and "WE," made of black PVC and white neon and stacked so that "ME" rests on top of "WE." The words are from a talk by Muhammad Ali at Harvard in 1975. Someone in the audience had asked him to "give us a poem." Ali had thought for a moment and replied, "Me, We," and Ligon, who often uses text in his work, turned the four letters into a wall sculpture that could be seen from the street at night. "People would ask where the museum was, and I'd give the address, and they'd say, 'Oh, the Me-We,'" Golden said.

David Hammons's red-black-and-green flag, which hung above the entrance to the old building, will preside over this one, and a new commissioned work by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates will incorporate architectural fragments from the demolished building, evoking historical memories. Golden wanted to honor what had been the museum's home for nearly forty years. On the last night before demolition began, she said, "there was a community party, with d.j.s and dancing. We danced our way out of the old building."

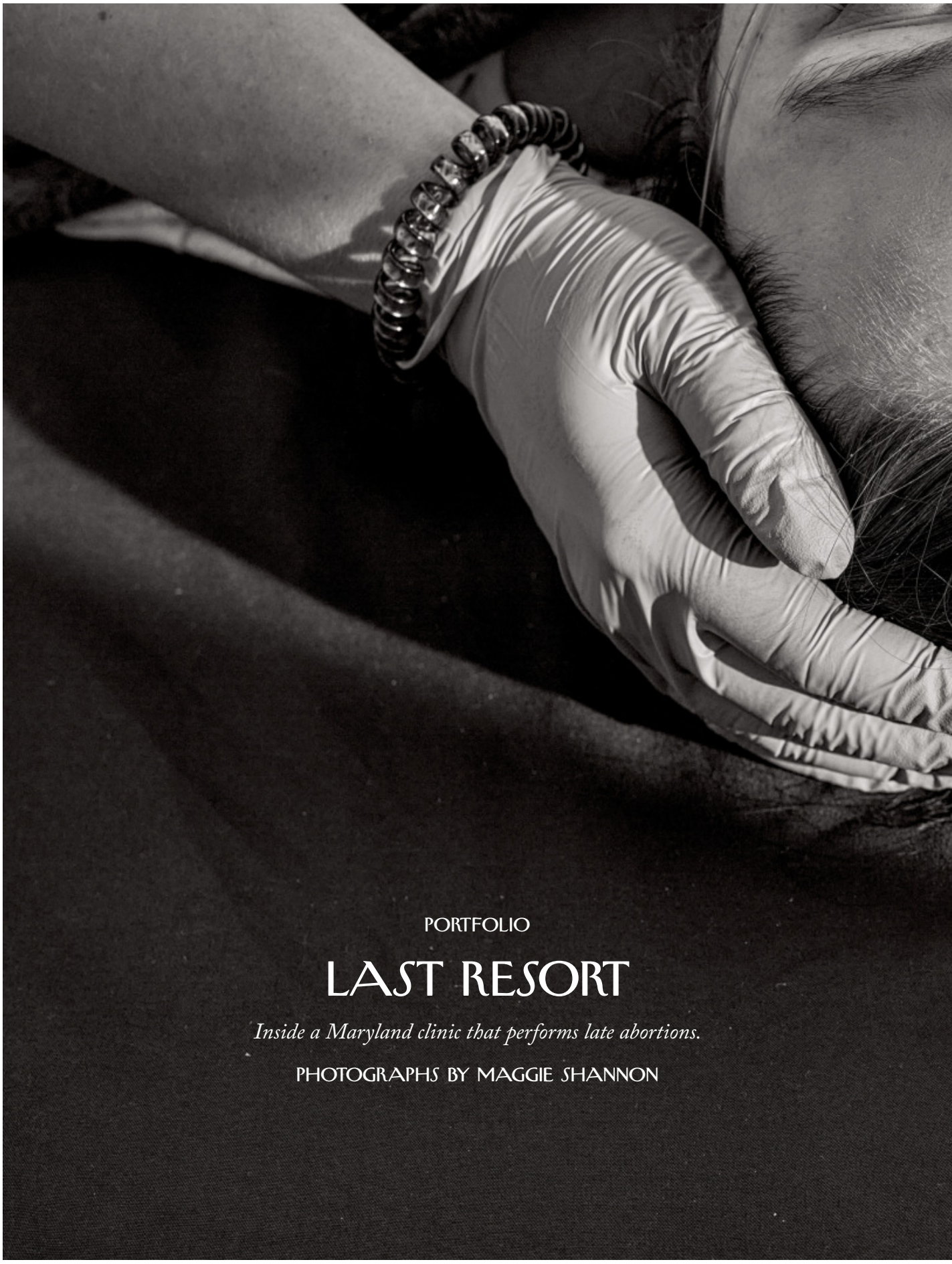
She had been talking and answering questions for more than an hour. I wondered how painful it was for her to say nothing about David Adjaye, and how long it would be before she would, if ever. He had given her the iconic "living laboratory," which he had talked about in their many conversations, and his unique, occasionally jarring, always fluid style was embedded in every detail of the architecture.

We went outside, crossed to the north side of 125th Street, and walked a block west to get a better view of the building. Golden stopped on the way to talk with a street vender she's known for many years, a man who sold leggings, hats, scarves, gloves, and tote bags. The venders keep her informed about what's going on in the neighborhood, she told me, and they ask about the museum—how close it is to being finished, when it will reopen. Harlem is bursting with energy and life—a big new hotel, the Renaissance, has opened on 125th Street; the Apollo Theatre has announced a major renovation; the Schomburg library is preparing to celebrate its hundredth birthday—and the venders can tell you all about it.

Seen from the street, the museum's façade is half glass and half concrete, a gray-black precast fabricated in Quebec. The building is much bigger than I had realized. It looked like an exuberant stacking of irregular blocky components, of varying sizes and heights and materials, fitting together with a complex but convincing logic. The effect was joyful, and oddly welcoming. I remembered something Adjaye had said to me, that the new Studio Museum would echo Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue. I also remembered Golden saying to me, very quietly, "There really hasn't been anything bigger in my life than this building."

The others said goodbye, and Golden and I headed to a temporary office space that the museum rents in a nearby high-rise. (Its main offices during the reconstruction are in the building that houses Red Rooster, a block away.) She told me about how the neighborhood informed her vision for the museum. "I experience Black culture everywhere in Harlem," she said, after we had settled in the featureless conference room. "To go to a restaurant in Harlem, to be in the stores, to be on the street, means we are experiencing Black culture. When Coco Gauff played her first match at the U.S. Open last summer, people were packed into a bar and a band was playing between points or during them. The musicians played and watched at the same time. Museums are traditionally hushed environments, and I want our museum to provide that, but I also want it to provide a lot of different things, and one of them is the experience of being on the street in Harlem. Let the museum be a place to encounter art, but also to encounter each other. People talk about getting into a museum before or after hours, but nothing about that interests me. I do not want to go to a museum without people. To me, that is half of the experience." At museums, when Golden sees people who look as though they are wondering where to go, she talks to them, asks questions, makes suggestions. "Just hearing the way different people experience art makes it more meaningful to me," she said. "You know when I love a museum most? On a Sunday afternoon at three o'clock."

Golden added, "When I was fifteen, I decided I wanted to be a curator. There's probably something terrible about that, because I've never done anything else. I was always on that path, and it was frictionless all the way. I understood that my time was never my own, it had to make sense for others. It had to open up space for others. But I feel that I am where I want to be, doing exactly what I am meant to be doing." ♦



PORTFOLIO

LAST RESORT

Inside a Maryland clinic that performs late abortions.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAGGIE SHANNON

For several years, Morgan Nuzzo, a nurse-midwife, and her friend and colleague Diane Horvath, an ob-gyn, talked about opening a clinic that would provide abortions in all trimesters of pregnancy. In May, 2022, the draft opinion of the Supreme Court ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade was leaked, infusing their plan with fresh urgency. The women had launched a GoFundMe campaign earlier that spring, noting that stand-alone clinics made up the majority of providers offering abortion after fifteen weeks, and that many of these had closed in recent years. Within weeks, Nuzzo and Horvath had raised more than a hundred thousand dollars; that summer, they started training employees for the new clinic, Partners in Abortion Care, in College Park, Maryland. They saw their first patient that October, and by the end of 2023 they had treated nearly five hundred. The youngest was eleven years old, the oldest fifty-three.

For nearly a year, the photographer Maggie Shannon visited the clinic regularly with her Canon R5 camera. The clinic's staff allowed Shannon in because they wanted to help lift some of the secrecy that surrounds later abortions. "Even within our own community" of reproductive-medicine practitioners, Nuzzo said, "later abortion is still kind of stigmatized." (Exact numbers are hard to come by, but only about a dozen clinics in the country provide abortions after twenty-four weeks; Partners in Abortion Care offers them up to thirty-four weeks.) In the end, Nuzzo and Horvath were astonished by how often patients agreed to be photographed, albeit with their faces concealed. Many of them wanted others to understand how the obstacles placed in the way of abortion care had pushed their procedures later and later.

Abortions in the second or third trimester are rare—the vast majority of abortions in the United States are performed in the first thirteen weeks of pregnancy—and when they occur the circumstances tend to be desperate. Horvath told me, "We know that when people decide they need an abortion they want to have it as soon as possible. Nobody is hanging out until they get to twenty or thirty weeks, saying, 'Oh, I think maybe I'll have my abortion now.'" A common scenario, she said, went like this: "You're in, say, Texas—you're pregnant and you need an abortion. You found out you were pregnant at eight weeks, which is a very usual time to find out. You arrange for child care—sixty per cent of people who have abortions are already parents—you get the money together, you're going to have to travel out of state. You go to the next state that you can go to, and you find out you're too far along for them. So now it's going to be three times as much money. The cost goes up because the complexity of care goes up. If you travel four or five states over, how many days off is that, how many days of child care?"

Some people pursue late abortions with wanted pregnancies, having just found out their fetuses have grave anomalies. Such was the case for Kate Cox, a Texas woman whose fetus was discovered to have a lethal genetic condition, and whose plan to have an abortion in state was recently thwarted by the Texas Supreme Court. Some patients have just been given their own diagnoses—of cancer, for instance. "They want to receive chemotherapy, and they're, like, 'I can't do this. I want to save my own life,'" Horvath explained. Other women, she added, have had to assimilate devastating new facts—"like the fact that the person who got you pregnant turns out to be an abuser who beats the shit out of you." There are also patients who are either too young to have a regular menstrual cycle or old enough to be approaching menopause, and did not realize until very late that they are pregnant.

One woman Shannon photographed, a thirty-six-year-old whom I'll call Amanda, was seven months along when she came to the clinic. Several years earlier, Amanda had been given a diagnosis of polycystic ovary syndrome, and doctors had told her that the condition made it very unlikely that she could conceive without in-vitro fertilization. Because of the aftereffects of recent weight-loss surgery—nausea when she felt too full—she didn't even consider that she might be pregnant until almost thirty weeks. When a home test came back positive, Amanda was floored. She told me that she'd never wanted kids. She'd been sexually abused as a child, struggled with depression, and was living from paycheck to paycheck; the man with whom she'd gotten pregnant had no interest in a baby. "I was very much not in control of my own life," she said.

It took two weeks to find a place that could do the necessary ultrasound to determine precisely how far along Amanda was; to enlist a friend to accompany her from Maine, where she lived, to Maryland; and to get the time off from her job, which is in retail. A later abortion can resemble going into labor, and take up to three days. First, you must wait for the cervix to dilate. Amanda and her friend stayed at a nearby hotel and returned to the clinic each day. The clinic's staff had spent hours connecting Amanda with organizations that help fund trips to other states for legal abortions. Such assistance is provided to nearly every patient. "Getting this procedure—it's a huge fight for women right now," Amanda told me.

—Margaret Talbot

A woman waits at the clinic for the third and final day of her late-abortion process. Horvath, the ob-gyn, says, "Beyond twenty-six weeks, people have an induction abortion, which is a little more like going into labor."

Charlotte Moore, a patient-care technician, and Benedict Landgren, an ob-gyn, perform a uterine aspiration. Landgren, who

lives in Colorado, travels to Maryland every month or two to work at the Partners in Abortion Care clinic.

Top: A speculum, which is used to examine the cervix. Bottom: Mifepristone, which is administered on the first day of the process. The Supreme Court will soon decide whether to uphold a lower-court ruling making the medication less accessible.

Stacey Leigh Rubin, an ob-gyn, wears a necklace symbolizing the grave risks women sometimes took when abortion was illegal. She says, "Now the danger is less that women end up septic in the E.R. and more that they risk prosecution."

Left: A patient's support person waits. Above: Staffers use a "pregnancy wheel" to help determine how far along a patient is. Potential clients cannot be accommodated if they are past thirty-four weeks. "Turning people away is the worst part of our jobs," Nuzzo, the nurse-midwife, says.

Nuzzo performs the final stage of the late-abortion procedure, in which medications are administered to induce the delivery of

fetal tissue. Horvath, the ob-gyn, notes, "This idea that people are delivering live fetuses—it just does not happen."

That Girl

Addie Citchens

ILLUSTRATION BY DEREK ABELLA

Underneath the huge, old, rusty awning, it was three shades darker and ten degrees cooler than in the street. Theo had been sitting on the porch rocker watching Shirlee go back and forth. It was strange to see a girl walking alone, but Shirlee was always out and about by herself. She always looked the same, too: once-upon-a-time-white canvas shoes, T-shirt tied above her belly button, jeans pulled up into her crotch. With one hand on her hip and the other shading her eyes, she stepped into the yard.

"Do a dude name Melvin stay on this street?"

The girl's hair was scraped up into a short peacock, styled with gelled baby hairs and curlicues. Her lips shined like she had just eaten chicken. Theo wanted to bust out laughing, but she knew that would be the absolute wrong thing to do. Shirlee had stopped short of climbing the porch steps.

"I don't know no Melvin."

"Oh, he owe me some money," Shirlee said, squinting at Theo's lap. "I know it ain't the summertime and you up there reading a book?"

Theo rolled her eyes and her neck. "S-so? And?"

"What's it about?" Shirlee said, suddenly softening her voice.

"I just started."

"Your mama and daddy in the house?"

"Nah, my big cousin."

"Read me some."

"R-r-read you some?"

"That's what I said, didn't it?"

"I can read good in my head but not out loud," Theo said.

Shirlee clambered up onto the porch and dropped down beside her. "I don't mind if you be stuttering. See, I'm the opposite—when I'm reading, it seem like my brain stutter—but I can count them dollars."

"What grade you in?" Theo asked.

"Going to the ninth but supposed to be in the eleventh. Teacher at Treadwell act like she couldn't give me one damn point, but I don't want to talk about that. Read the story."

"Well, this takes place in England during the First World War," Theo said. "And I'm going to the ninth grade."

"O.K., that's cool," Shirlee said around the fingers in her mouth. She sucked the two by the thumb and was moving the rocker with her foot. "All we need is one of them hanging things."

"What hanging things?"

"Like what people in Hawaii lay down in—uh, they hang it in the middle of two trees."

"Oh, a hammock."

"Yeah," Shirlee said. "We need a hammock."

The miraculous thing was that, unlike in school, Theo's voice got clearer and sturdier as she read. She didn't ever want to stop reading. Or to be away from the soft puff of Shirlee's breathing. She didn't want an end to the pressure of Shirlee's foot hooked around her shin, or to cease hearing the determined sound of Shirlee sucking her fingers. She also didn't want her mama to pull up and act crazy. Jane didn't like strangers at her house.

"My mama'll be home in a minute," Theo said.

"I feel you," Shirlee said.

She stood and stretched her long arms, revealing a narrow, muscly belly as her shirt crept up. She raked the back of her hair with her fingers, worked her lip gloss out of her pocket, and smeared it on.

"Well, it's been real, girl," she said, and bounced down the stairs.

Theo was tired of being friendless and lonely, of having no one who could understand her. She jumped up to follow Shirlee.

"You can come back," she said. "Just only between the hours of nine and three. If you see a white Buick in the driveway, pass on by—oh, and never on the weekends."

"O.K. You like Kool-Aid and pickles?"

"Who don't?"

Shirlee threw up her middle finger and switched off. Jane would not approve. She, of all people, had seen fit to grow judgmental. Maybe it was because her third husband was a good man. He went to church, worked at the post office, and had got a big settlement check a few years ago. Sighing, Theo went into the house to tell Keita she was going to ride her bike, but Keita was still locked up in the guest room with Freddy Pettis. They were gonna have to break it up soon.

"On my bike," she called as she continued out the back door.

She unchained her bike and skidded from the driveway into the street. She'd just make a few blocks and come back, take some time for herself before the adults got home.

"He's a good man," Jane must have said a thousand times about Roger, after previously saying you couldn't melt and pour another man on her.

Theo had to admit that, in the two years since Roger had come along, Jane barely hollered or whipped her anymore. She was too busy in Roger's lap, picking in his hair or rubbing his feet. Another thing was that he kept Jane out a lot. Roger spun Southern-soul records at the Classic Hitz club on the weekends, and Jane always went with him. His d.j. name was Roger That. It tickled Theo when he sauntered through the house singing in his beautiful voice and practicing his routine. He cupped a hand over his mouth, making it sound like a CB radio: "You better Roger That and keep on dancing." No, Roger wasn't so bad.

After several blocks, Theo spun her bike back into her yard. She could hear his system thumping. Every evening, he came in turning on music. Bobby (Blue) Bland, Aretha Franklin, Millie Jackson, the Eagles, the Doors—anything could be playing. At the moment, he was blasting "Atomic Dog," and Theo could hear him singing before she opened the door. Jane was dancing in her socks while Roger checked a pan on the stove. He spotted Theo, looked her sincerely in the eye, and began barking like a rabid dog. She didn't want to laugh, but she couldn't help it. That was the difference between him and the last man: Roger didn't mind looking stupid.

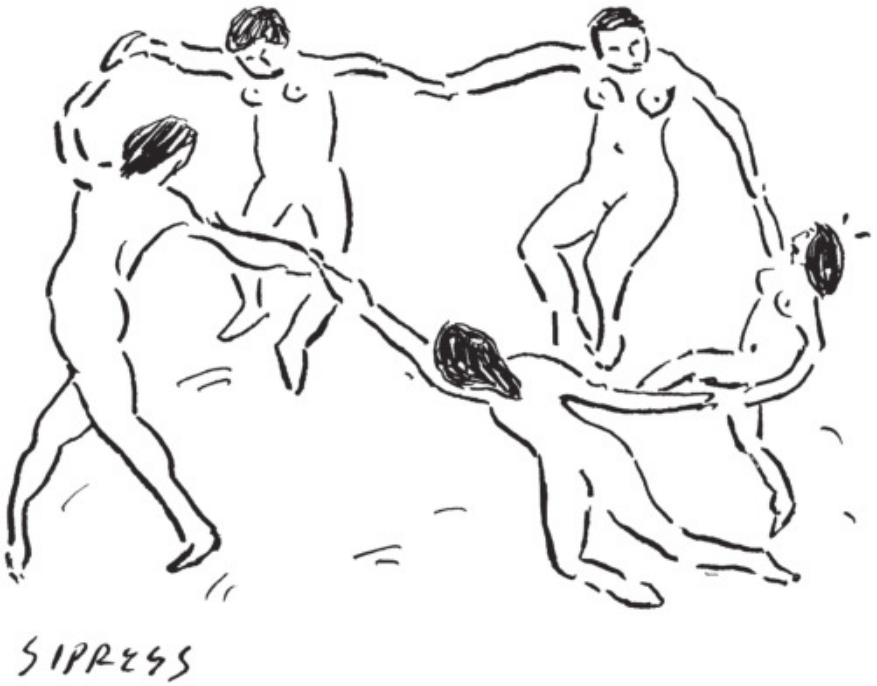
"Girl, get ready for some macaroni salad, Italian sausage in a potato bun, and baked beans," Roger said. "And look down there at that monster melon I picked up."

He was also a much better cook than Jane.

As soon as Jane left the next day, Theo parked her rear on the porch swing to wait for Shirlee. Keita came out to investigate.

"I'm waiting on my friend," Theo said.

"O.K.," Keita said. "Boyfriend or girlfriend?"



"I gotta say, this is some weird book club."

• •

"Girl, duh," Theo said.

She stayed by the house all day, but Shirlee didn't show. If Keita remembered, she didn't mention it. Theo was not only ashamed but stunned, though that didn't keep her from going back and forth to the porch the next day, too, until Keita shouted at her to quit going in and out. Theo chose to stay out, and by two o'clock she figured it didn't make no sense for Shirlee to come then. She got on her bike to clear her head.

At dinner, Roger said, "The girl sure is quiet tonight."

Jane set her fork down. "Something wrong, Pooh? You and Keita getting along all right?"

Theo nodded.

"You probably tired from riding that bike in the high noon," Jane said. "Gone mess around and be black as a field hand. I remember . . ."

Jane forked the potato salad but didn't eat it, nor did she continue her train of thought. She had gained weight since she quit smoking and started eating all of Roger's good cooking. One night, Theo had caught her standing in front of the sink, shovelling a hunk of pound cake into her mouth. She'd frozen like a burglar.

"What were you saying?" Roger asked.

"I forgot," Jane said.

"You all right, doll?" he asked Theo.

"Right as rain," she lied.

Around noon that Friday, Shirlee finally switched up the street carrying a large paper bag. She wore jeans well ventilated with holes and a small doughnut on the side of her head, tied with red yarn ribbon.

"Took you long enough," Theo called out.

"You must've missed me," Shirlee said.

Theo rolled her eyes but was curious about the contents of the bag.

"Whew—can we go inside? It's hot as hell out here," Shirlee said.

"Lemme check," Theo said.

Theo was sure Keita wouldn't mind, but she didn't want to chance it, so she stepped into the house, and, finding the front room cool and empty, she motioned for Shirlee. They tiptoed into Theo's bedroom.

"Girl, you so lucky—got your own room. I don't even got my own bed sometimes."

Shirlee unloaded Vitner's hot-and-sour chips, two pouches of sour pickles, Kool-Aid packets, and peach Faygo onto Theo's vanity. It was as if she either liked everything Theo liked or had somehow read her appetite.

"Mind if I help myself to these chips?"

"Go 'head, girl," Shirlee said. She had got on her knees in the closet and seemed more interested in exploring Theo's stuff than in eating. "All these shoes—ugh—you oughta give me some. What size you wear?"

"Six," Theo said, but Shirlee was already trying to work her feet into a pair of low red heels that Roger's grown daughter, Natasha, had sent her.

"Damn," Shirlee said. "Li'l-ass feet. I wear an eight—my daddy got big feet. I'm, like, how I'm so skinny and my feet so damn long? At least I could have a big booty to balance it off."

Theo started on one of the pickles. "You still got time to grow one," she said to encourage her.

"Thank you, friend."

"I'm your friend?"

Shirlee nodded, sat very close. Theo's neck was getting hot. For some stupid, embarrassing reason, her eyes filled with water that ran down her face. Shirlee kissed her forehead, her cheeks, then her lips; Theo could double taste her tears. They kissed, then said "Um" before kissing some more. Finally, Shirlee drew back.

"You want me to leave?"

"Not unless you want to," Theo said.

"You be having bad dreams?"

"Yeah," Theo said. "Sometimes."

"Me, too, friend."

"I got a good book for us," Theo said the next time she saw Shirlee. She wore a low-rise denim skirt and had a paper bag clenched in her hand.

"Cool. I brought you something."

Shirlee sat beside Theo on the swing and dropped the package in her lap—lip gloss, bubble gum, chips, Zebra Cakes, mini candy bars, and a hot-pink bottle of bubbles. Theo took the bubbles and shoved the bag back into Shirlee's hands.

"Friend, I can't take all this stuff."

"Yes, you can, friend. I got it for you."

Theo fished the wand from the bottle and slowly blew a long stream of bubbles up toward the awning. Together and quietly, they watched them fly around and die.

"How 'bout I do something to that head of yours?" Shirlee said. "All that hair and you got them ponytails like a baby."

Theo nodded, and in a moment they were in her room. Shirlee was sitting on the chair, and Theo on the floor between Shirlee's knees.

"Whew," Shirlee said, stretching a piece of hair down past Theo's bra.

"My cousin's goes to her waist, plus it don't nap up like mine do," Theo said.

Shirlee stopped in the middle of brushing and leaned to one side.

"Girl, you wouldn't be able to tell me absolutely nothing if my hair went all the way down to my waist. I'd be too busy shaking it."

"Like this?" Theo said, tossing her head.

Shirlee yanked a scarf from Theo's dresser and hung it around her own head. "More like this," she said, and began to whip it from side to side, lifting her leg to make her butt jump. They laughed so hard. Finally, Shirlee picked the brush up again, but she didn't go back to work on Theo's hair. Instead, she stared into Theo's mirror.

"Can I tell you something?"

"O.K.," Theo said.

"It's something that happened to me last year. Now, do you really want to hear this?"

"Girl, if you don't hurry up," Theo said, hoisting herself from the floor.

"So Mrs. Tyler sent me to the office because she said my shorts was too little, and Mr. Barnes checked them all right. I walked in the office, and he stopped what he was doing and frowned at me. He said, 'Come here, child. Come round the desk.'

"I went over there, and just like that he stuck his hand between my legs. My breath went out of me. You just don't expect no man like that to do that to you. But seemed like I blinked and his hand was gone. His face had been regular and everything. He was, like, 'You don't want to be walking around with this on. You'll have them nasty tail boys thinking all kinds of things about you. Now, go ask Mrs. McCaskill to let you call your grandmama, and don't wear them shorts back.'"

"You didn't say nothing to nobody?" Theo said.

"Who gone believe *me*? Sometimes I think I made it up 'cause it happened so quick. Other people felt on me before, but they did it with their fingers or wanted me to touch on them. He just touched me like he was checking my temperature down there or something. Do you think that count?"

Theo didn't know what to say, so she didn't answer. Shirlee was still gazing at herself. Theo gazed at the reflection but couldn't call Shirlee's expression. She couldn't call her appearance, either. Shirlee had very good things about her, like her dewy, yellow skin and her pillowy lips, and very bad things, like her hairy sideburns and teeth troubled by a lifetime of finger-sucking. Maybe she, too, was conflicted by her face.

"I must be too damn touchable," she said to the mirror. "What's the book?"

"Dun-dun-dunnn," Theo said, getting it off the nightstand. "It's 'Dead W-w-wrong: A Look at Some of America's Most Heinous Killers.'"

She had highlighted and written all over the pages, even though it was from the library.

"What do 'heinous' mean?" Shirlee said.

"Evil," Theo said evilly.

She plopped down on her back, and Shirlee lay beside her. Theo read about Joe Ray McDonald, a Wisconsin drifter who strangled and bludgeoned his prostitute victims, then dug his initials into their stomachs. Shirlee every so often

butted in with a "Damn, that's fucked up." As she sucked her fingers, she played with Theo's earlobe, and Theo finally had to set the book aside for lack of concentration. She wondered if Shirlee was a dyke, if they were both dykes.

"Men always killing women," Shirlee said. "We should go around killing *them* for a change."

"Yeah, girl, you right. Jane's husbands used to beat her and everything."

"This how we gone do it. We'll hang around at the pool hall and whatnot, and when we see one of them looking at us we gone go up to them and say, 'I got a yo-yo for you to play with.' That'll drive them wild, and they gone come running."

Theo giggled and practiced: "I got a yo-yo you can play with."

Deep inside, she trembled with fear, and power, and the fear of power. She had not stuttered any of those words. Some nondescript man slithered toward them, trying to trick them into his car. So intent was he to get down that he either ignored or didn't notice the icepick she had raised above his head. It went into the skin and muscle of his back with a nasty crack. She described the process in great, bloody detail. Beside her, Shirlee had firefly legs.

Shirlee's house was a shadowy place choked with listless bodies, a roaring TV, and bold roaches. Upstairs, a fight was happening, composed of what sounded like an army of boys. Shirlee's grandmother hobbled down the hall without looking up, humming a church song.

Shirlee was primping in the bathroom mirror, working patiently with her baby hairs, swirling a dollop of Ampro gel with Vaseline so that the gel wouldn't crust up. Then, an eternity of cherry roller ball for her lips, eyeliner to make her eyes look tiny, mean, and sexy, and a beauty mark beside her mouth. Theo couldn't understand how Shirlee could be so calm and cool in there: the room smelled strongly of piss, and the watery light from the bulb made Theo's eyes ache. Hard-dragging footsteps were getting nearer, and the door of the bathroom swung open, causing the girls to turn. Shirlee's mother came in with a low *umph*, staring them up and down.

"You think you cute? You ain't cute, bitch."

When the woman left, Shirlee threw her head back so tears wouldn't mess up the fresh eyeliner. "Come on, girl. Let's dip."

Theo grabbed her hand and squeezed it briefly. They walked through the hall and out the front door.

The sunshine was a shock after the dim house.

"We gone get some green," she said.

Theo stopped in her tracks, heart

thump-thumping. "I ain't never smoked no weed before."

"Trust me. It's all good. We gone fly high, li'l mama."

But Theo became more and more uncertain as they went. It was getting hot, and Shirlee was walking too damn fast and too damn far; no wonder she was so skinny. Finally, they came to a brick house with green grass and a flower bed in front of a bay window. When Shirlee knocked, a big bear of a man opened the door.

"Uh-uh," Theo said, "I ain't going in there."

"One second, Lane," Shirlee said, sounding like she was trying to stay collected. She pulled Theo over to the side of the house. "I been knowing this nigga. He give me tat for tit."

"I ain't doing that."

"You ain't got to do it. I'm gone do it," Shirlee laughed. "You staying up front."

"Girl, that's a grown man in there."

"That boy ain't but seventeen. Now, do you want some weed or what?"

"Not if you gotta get it like that," Theo said.

"I don't have to get it like that. I want to get it like that. That's the difference."

Shirlee disappeared into the house; Theo sat on the couch with her legs pinched together. "This Is How We Do It" was on the stereo. After it had played four times, Theo decided that Shirlee had been gone an unreasonably long while. She began to suspect that, somewhere in that house, bear boy was showing Shirlee's young body no slack. When Shirlee returned, Theo would remind her about the Wisconsin drifter and the danger of this kind of life style. She hadn't heard screaming or a thump or anything like that, though, so she figured that whatever was happening was welcome.

She decided to leave, but as soon as she'd locked herself outside she regretted it. The heat was suffocating. Her tongue felt like dough in the stove of her mouth. Each step seemed like her last; she fought the urge to give up and lie down in the street. Finally, her house shimmered before her like a mirage. Miraculously, she was under the awning, and her key was turning in the lock. She stumbled onto the couch. Some time passed; she could hear Keita's voice cutting through to her consciousness.

"I hope to God you're not pregnant."

"I might be a dyke," Theo mumbled.

The next morning, her back hurt. She felt not only like an old woman but like she had been born an old woman. The sounds in the house were unfamiliar, quieter. Her bedside clock claimed it was ten. That couldn't be right; she never slept this late. She got out of bed and was surprised to see Jane in the hall. Jane never missed work.

"I'm playing hooky to take care of my baby," she said. "Anything you want to talk about, Pooh?"

Theo shook her head.

"'Cause you know you can talk to me about anything. . . ."

Since when?

"You sure you and Keita getting along O.K.?"

Theo nodded.

"You not gone say nothing?"

She shook her head.

"Rog made you blueberry waffles. Make your bed while I throw you one on the waffle iron."

Theo jumped to it. She had discovered the word "delectable" while looking up synonyms for "delicious." As she straightened her sheets, she envisioned Roger quitting his job and opening a restaurant called Delectables where he sang the menu. People would come from far and wide, and Hollywood would hear about it and give him his own cooking show, "Delectables with Roger," and he would sing and kiss his fingertips because the food was so good. At the end of each episode, he would cup his hand over his imaginary radio and say, "You better Roger That and keep on cooking."

By the time Theo got into the kitchen, Jane was working the waffle out of the iron. Her arm fat shook, and dimples were pushing through the fabric of her shorts.

"You look different, Ma," Theo blurted.

Jane set the plate in front of her—one egg sunny-side up, a waffle, and a sausage, perfectly circular and evenly brown, not charred the way she had made them before Roger. Jane's hands went to her hips.

"Different how?"

"Never mind," Theo said.

Jane emptied the coffeepot into her mug and dumped in sugar. "Some girl came by for you earlier this morning."

That fool! Shirlee knew not to come by when Jane's car was in the driveway.

"I hope you don't be having folks in my house, Theodara Robinson. You nor Keita. I better call and talk to her real good."

Theo was just happy Jane hadn't said anything bad about Shirlee. She would've gladly slung a few choice words if Jane talked bad about her.

Shirlee sat cross-legged in the middle of her bedroom floor, between the bunk beds, rolling them something to smoke. Theo wasn't about to sit on that floor with all them roaches marching, so she perched on the edge of Shirlee's bunk. To keep from staring at Shirlee's smooth, yellow skin and open legs, Theo focussed on the part in her friend's hair. Shirlee looked up and caught her gaze. She smiled, took a bite out of her Kool-Aid pickle (which she ate without sugar), and scooted over to give Theo sour, bitter kisses.

"Guess what?" Shirlee said.

"What?"

"You oughta let me spend the night with you."

"Huh?" Theo said.

"You heard me," Shirlee said, rolling her neck.

Theo had heard her. The "huh" was for not understanding why she would say such a thing.

"Shirlee, you know you can't spend the night over my house."

"Yes, I could. I could just dart in the back door and into your bedroom and just dart out before anybody get up."

Theo smiled at the simplicity of the plan, and then a terrible coldness

YOU BELONG TO THE WORLD

as do your children, as does your husband.
It's strange even now to understand that
you are a mother and a wife, that these gifts
were given to you and that you received them,
fond as you've always been of declining
invitations. You belong to the world. The hands
that put a peach tree into the earth exactly
where the last one died in the freeze belong
to the world and will someday feed it again,
differently, your body will become food again
for something, just as it did so humorously
when you became a mother, hungry beings
clamoring at your breast, born as they'd been
with the bodily passion for survival that is
our kind's one common feature. You belong
to the world, animal. Deal with it. Even as
the great abstractions come to take you away,
the regrets, the distractions, you can at any second
come back to the world to which you belong,
the world you never left, won't ever leave, cells
forever, forever going through their changes,
as they have been since you were less than
anything, simple information born inside
your own mother's newborn body, itself made
from the stuff your grandmother carried within hers
when at twelve she packed her belongings
and left the Scottish island she'd known—all
she'd ever known—on a ship bound for Ellis Island,
carrying within her your mother, you, the great
human future that dwells now inside the bodies
of your children, the young, who, like you,
belong to the world.

—Carrie Fountain

poured over her heart at the thought of Jane catching them. She must have frowned.

"I ain't scared of your mama," Shirlee said.

"You ain't got to live with her, and, besides, I see you almost every day."

"But not on the weekends, and night is different. People sweeter at night. You probably smell like a baby, probably make little noises. And it's things you can only do at night."

"Like what?"

"I don't know—secret, sweet stuff," Shirlee said.

Theo was melting at the idea. It would have to be on a black night with no stars. She would leave the back door unlocked with the hope that a serial killer wouldn't discover it before Shirlee did. Once Shirlee was in the bedroom, every stitch of her clothing would come off as if by magic. Her nipples would be like erasers on her chest, her shoulders pulled back like a gymnast's. A small light shone in the spot where the principal had once cupped her, the light of the world. It winked as Shirlee walked toward Theo's bed. She would smell like Juicy Fruit and pilfered Cool Water and, faintly, of pickles.

"Let's go to Mr. Campbell's. My sister wants some pink bobby socks," Shirlee said when they got into the street.

Stepping inside the Sophisticated Lady Shop gave Theo a frantic, welcoming rush. There were a zillion things for sale or snatch, too much for any shopkeeper to inventory: plastic music-class recorders, débutante gloves, lace doilies, powder puffs with powder that smelled like fairy feet, Don't-B-Bald serum, Valentine's Day body stockings, fake hair hanging off tracks—Mr. Campbell charged by width, so some women came just to buy bangs—and anything else that could make a woman's insides and outsides pleasant. His anti-theft precautions were two big mirrors angled from the ceiling and his old mother on a stool at the back.

Theo's right hand fingered the mascaras, colored blue and purple, but she put those back. Cherry roller-ball gloss, Blue Nile roller-ball fragrance, and a unicorn-head key chain went into her bra. Shirlee liked to browse, but Theo went up all the aisles just once, preferring to get in and out. On her way out, she grabbed a bag of Skittles and a rusty half-off pair of hoop earrings to pay for in order to seem legitimate. Surely Mr. Campbell could hear her heart going *thup-thup-thup* as he rang up her purchases, but he smiled at her, gave her change, and put her things in a bag. Theo felt awful when he smiled.

Still jittery, she walked off a bit from the store and lit a cigarette as she waited for Shirlee.

"Take your fast ass home, Robinson," a woman shouted.

Theo took off running.

"Mind your mothafuckin' business," she heard Shirlee yell behind her.

It took Shirlee a minute to catch up.

"Scary ass," she said, skidding to a stop.

Theo wanted to slap the taste out of her mouth. Shirlee had Theo hanging around the hood like a vagabond; Theo was bound to get caught up.

"I gotta go," she mumbled.

"Bye, scary Mary."

Shirlee stomped off. Theo was relieved to walk home alone; sometimes Shirlee was just too much. She locked her bedroom door and soothed herself by examining her new possessions, one by one. Keita knocked, causing Theo to jump.

"Your mama here."

Theo shoved the things into her

pillowcase and got to the front door, panting. Keita was coming up the walk with grocery bags. Theo went to see if there were more and carried some to the kitchen table. Much to her disappointment, Jane had started getting pots and pans out of the cabinets.

"Roger not cooking tonight?"

"Nah," Jane said.

Theo's insides frowned; she hoped her mother wouldn't be trying something with a high degree of difficulty. Jane was staring into the refrigerator but came out with twitchy eyes and no food. She ground her knuckles into her eye sockets.

"What am I supposed to be doing?"

"Cooking," Theo said, trying to get in to hug her mother.

"Please," Jane said, pushing her off.

Theo went to her room to lie down. After a while, the radio came on, which meant that Roger had arrived. J. Blackfoot commanded a taxi to take him to the other side of town. Soon Jane was calling her to eat. Theo counted to thirty and went. Jane's meatloaf looked grumpy and tasted grumpy, even after Theo microwaved a coat of cheese on top. No one was eating it; as a matter of fact, no one was eating at all. They were looking Theo in the face.

"Huh," she said.

"What a word to say to your mama," Jane said.

Roger spoke. "What you be doing here in the daytime, Theo?"

"Reading, riding my bike. Keita be doing her schoolwork. I w-watch TV sometimes. Jerry Springer."

"Oh, no," Roger said.

"It's funny." Theo forced herself to giggle.

"I love you, you know that?" Jane said.

The words came out hard, hard enough for both Theo and Roger to look at Jane funny. Her eyes resembled a baby seal's.

Theo couldn't sleep that night. Her thoughts were feverish, wondering if Shirlee was mad at her and then picturing her buttery legs in her shorts. The more she thought about her friend, the more she thought Shirlee should be able to spend the night. Other people's friends spent the night at their houses. Jane was too unreasonable. While Jane was in the tub, Theo phoned Shirlee and asked if she still wanted to come over.

The third time, they were too bold. Shirlee came earlier, around nine, so she could stay longer. Not an hour later, Jane was shaking the knob.

"Who you talking to, girl? Unlock this damn door."

Before Theo could get to her feet, Jane had shouldered it open. Shirlee ran out the back of the house while Theo lit out for the living room with Jane on her heels swinging an extension cord. It landed on Theo's thighs, her shoulder, her cheek. Why did she have to be in only her drawers? Why had they been greedy?

"What's going on?" Roger said.

"Don't come out here, Roger," Jane growled.

Fuck this shit, Theo wanted to shout. In the seconds of distraction caused by Roger, she snatched the knobby end of the cord and wrapped it around her wrist.

"If you don't let go of this damn cord."

"No!" Theo said.

Jane wrapped her end around her wrist as well. Theo pulled herself to her feet, body sparkling with pain. Jane gave the cord a yank, and Theo yanked back. Theo saw Jane preparing for the jerk of all jerks, and she let go of the cord, sending her mother tumbling to the floor, looking more stunned than hurt. She went to stand over Jane, wanted to mash her foot in her mother's face.

"Get from over me," Jane snapped.

What the fuck was Jane mad about? She wasn't the one who had been assaulted. Theo's welts tightened and released, but the pain was interesting, not overwhelming. The worst was on her shoulder, where the skin was raw. She noticed Total's "Kissin' You" super low and still on repeat on the CD player. Just a few minutes ago, the song had her feeling like a goddess, but now she felt like a kicked dog. Jane was off the floor, looking for something. Theo flinched when she came near her. Jerkily, Jane laced Theo's arms into a robe and tied the waist. Theo didn't make a move. If she got into a fight in school, she couldn't say, "I learned it by watching you," the way the boy on the anti-drugs commercial had said to his daddy. A row with Jane made her feel a thousand times worse than a school fight. When she turned sixteen, she would move out.

"I should've followed my first mind and made you talk to me. Maybe it wouldn't have come to this," Jane said. "You need to understand that I'm your mama, and I am the only person you got in this world. I'm responsible for everything. And you cannot be a bulldagger."

At least they couldn't have no out-of-wedlock children, Theo thought, as she watched her mother vacantly.

"The mere fact that that girl is out all times of night like this should tell you something. She headed for the pipe and the needle and will have you headed there, too."

Theo wanted to tell Jane that she was her own person, but she knew it would do no good. Jane was worried about the wrong damn thing; what she should be worried about was how she had just ripped Theo's skin open with an electrical cord. She could tell Jane was going off to cry, even though she didn't have any reason or right to.

Theo woke to the sound of fiddling and scraping in her room but didn't take the blanket from over her head.

"Your mama told me to come get the TV," she heard Roger say.

The electric screwdriver whined, stopped, and whined again. After a while, it stopped for good, and she heard a huge commotion. She could tell Roger was looking at her.

"You want something to eat, girl?"

Theo said nothing.

"Your mama just want the best for you."

Roger was new here and didn't know any better, so there would be no point in trying to set him straight. When she peered from under the blanket, she saw that he had taken her door off. He returned and put a tray on her nightstand. She didn't touch the food, but she read the note from Jane.

THEO'S NEW SUMMER SCHEDULE:

Mon-Fri—Magnolia Day Services w/ Aunt Trina
Tuesday—Adults on Fire for Christ Bible Class
Wednesday—Youth on Fire for Christ Bible Class
Thursday—Usher Board meeting
Friday—Upper Room Counsel w/ Mother Buchanon
Saturday—Youth Choir practice
Sunday—Upper Room Counsel w/ Rev. Tod

Theo was embarrassed to see how Jane had put everybody in her business. Spending all that time in church was bad enough, but going to Magnolia Day with Aunt Trina was going to be the worst. For one, it was with Aunt Trina, and, two, it was an adult day-care center for special people to get out of the house. Three weeks of it would kill her or turn her into one of them. She didn't know how she'd make it through.

"How was your day?"

"Great," Theo said, returning the smirk her mother gave her.

But, really, the day hadn't been too bad at all. It had been like watching a real-life TV show with very peculiar characters. She'd learned all sorts of things, like when Aunt Trina said you could put disorder on a schedule as long as you kept it busy with quality activities. She'd also learned plenty of new vocabulary words listening to her aunt talk in her bill-payer voice. Like how Ishmael and Poppy were verbal and high-functioning. Donald was nonverbal but could sign what he wanted. A tower of a man, he walked on his tiptoes and kept his fingers flapping by his ears, as if as long as he heard them they were still there. Or maybe they were telling him delectable secrets. Only one student, Nadine, really disturbed Theo. She rocked side to side and repeated a single syllable in varying lengths and volumes—*lub, lub, luuub*. All the other students looked a little different, but Nadine could've been on TV. Her skin was clear, her wavy auburn hair in a long braid, and she had sea-foam-green eyes. Right before lunch, Theo had spotted her all alone and went up to her. She tried to focus Nadine's lovely eyes by holding the woman's shoulders steady, looking her straight on, and saying with her mind, If you keep your eyes still, it will change your life.

"Lub," Nadine said.

"Theodara, leave Nadine alone," Aunt Trina said.

Aunt Trina, who had a lot in common with her sister Jane, had been the biggest surprise, sweet and gentle to the people she worked alongside and sweeter and gentler to the special people. But she was still the same old Aunt Trina to Theo. They were having lunch together in Aunt Trina's office when she started up with the questions.

"Theodara Robinson, you weren't really doing what Jane said?"

Theo rolled her eyes.

"The old folk used to say that stuff will make you weak as water," her aunt said, laughing.

But it wasn't funny to Theo. Her mother was such a traitor, and she talked too damn much. Theo had never told anybody about the time she'd caught Jane and a man who looked like Olive Oyl hunching on the kitchen floor when Jane was between husbands.

Devotional duty was supposed to be rotated among the Youth on Fire, but they knew better than to ask Theo. Keith Jackson, however, marched right up to the front like Bobby Jones. Keith was in eighth grade and looked like a pear; in spite of that, he was smooth on the microphone.

"Good evening, saints," he said. "It was on my spirit to do something a little different tonight. I hope don't nobody mind. Brother Dobbs, can you come up here and help me? You, too, Cecelia."

That left only Theo and Rodney Anderson for the audience. As Keith and the others began to sing, Theo carefully considered the lyrics: "I want two wings to veil my face. I want two wings to fly

"I'm glad we decided to have a small wedding with a big cake."

away." Though a many-winged creature would surely be an awesome sight, Theo decided she needed only the two wings it would take to get away. When the song was over, Keith prayed. Theo's attention went to a rickety card table, which held juice and cookies for the end of class. After a triple amen, Keith squeezed in beside her, spilling a portion of his thigh over into her seat. Now she wouldn't even be able to read the Harlequin Romance she'd brought to pass the time. Jane would pay for this. As soon as Jane turned sixty, Theo was going to put her in a nursing home where they neglected their residents.

Up front, Brother Dobbs was telling everyone to turn to Revelations. He stumbled through a reading, something about Jesus having a wedding—not at *a* church, but to *the* Church.

Cecelia Tod was another star student. "The whole point of this scripture is that the Church needs to make ready for Jesus to come like a bride would for her wedding," she said.

"You're on fire tonight, Li'l Sister Tod. What does it look like for the Church to get ready?"

Duh, Theo thought, the Church has to douche and shop for a dress. Theo pictured Jesus on his wedding night, gently removing his robe. His hair blew continuously and without wind. His holy rod trembled with desire, and he bit his lip, trying to hold back the emotion. Theo covered her laugh with a cough and kept coughing until Brother Dobbs told her to go see about herself. She darted out of her chair and into the hall, where she noticed that Reverend Tod's study door was ajar. She cut through the gloom and sat behind his desk. She slid her feet out of her shoes and tugged the shaggy carpet with her toes. The room's dimness and the air-conditioning raised up hairs all over her skin. Making fun of Jesus, freaking with Shirlee, stealing—Theo should soak up this good air since she was probably going to roast like a weenie in the hottest fire of Hell.

Maybe Hell was inescapable. Some people had Hell on earth, like the flat-headed kids in Romanian orphanages or Sojourner Truth. Some people had Hell of the mind, like the students at Magnolia Day. And Theo, probably. Doing all this thinking, she was leaving fingerprints all over the pastor's glass desk. In the hall, the pale, red glow of the exit sign beckoned, so she crept toward it. The door opened with an enormous hiss; she paused, listening to and watching the lonely street, but no one came to save her. When she got back to class, Brother Dobbs looked at her funny. She put her hand over her lower stomach, a gesture the old man could interpret in many ways, and took a new seat, closer to the refreshments.

"What did you learn tonight?" Jane asked in the car.

"Plenty," Theo said.

"Like what? Better yet, I want you to write me a paragraph about it when you get home. And I know that girl been calling my house and hanging up, bringing Satan all up in my home. You hear me?"

Most people didn't know that the spirit was housed between the skin and the muscle. An invisible razor was cutting Theo's loose. The feeling was excruciating but a blessing as well, because her skin had been so tight that it had been smothering her spirit. She dragged herself from the car. Inside, Roger popped out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

"You feeling any better, girl?" he asked, as if she'd had the flu.

Theo was all set to walk back to her room like she hadn't heard him, but Jane stopped her.

"Don't you hear your daddy talking to you?"

It struck her then that Jane was absolutely Looney Tunes. Theo mumbled some answer to Roger, but he couldn't reply, given that Jane was kissing his jaw.

"Lord, I don't know what we gone do with that child," Jane said.

Later, Theo heard the pipes groaning as Jane ran her bath. She called Shirlee.

"Your mama tromped that ass, didn't she? You want to go to the mall tomorrow? I want some Sbarro's."

"No, Shirlee. I just . . . I just . . ."

Theo had known that the conversation would go this way. She didn't know why she'd even called.

"I'm 'bout to come over there."

"No!" Theo said. "Do. Not. Come. To. My. House."

"I don't know why I tried to hang with such a kid."

"I'm 'bout to go, Shirlee."

"What you call me for?"

"I don't even know, but I gotta go." But she didn't; she listened to their silence.

Shirlee's voice was a rush. "I miss you already. Please, friend. I'll come late."

"Real late," Theo said.

Long past midnight, there was a light tap on the window, and Theo jumped out of bed. She hadn't been asleep, but she hadn't been awake, either. She skipped shoes and slid out the back door. Shirlee was on the top step, lighting a cigarette. Theo had the urge to push her down the stairs.

"Step down with that smoking, girl."

"My bad. Scary ass." Shirlee laughed. "So we going to the mall tomorrow or what?"

She was puffing and walking around. Under that tree, they had lain in the dappled sunshine, their skin glued with sweat. That magic, Theo knew, was gone.

"Give me one of those," she said.

Shirlee swept a cigarette from somewhere and stuck it into Theo's mouth. She touched the place on Theo's cheek that had been bruised by the cord. It made Theo nervous and shameful and something else she couldn't identify.

"I-I-I can't hang with you no more," she said.

"You couldn't hang with me in the first place," Shirlee snapped.

Tears were in her eyes. Theo's heart quickened, but she didn't know the right words, so she didn't attempt any.

"So it's like that?" Shirlee said.

Theo shrugged, not wanting to cry herself.

"It's been real, girl." Shirlee nodded. "It's been really real."

And, like that, she was gone. No one would ever again cup Theo as tenderly as that girl had. The thought shook her from her daze, but when she jogged into the front yard Shirlee was already halfway up the street.

"Leelee," Theo called.

Shirlee started running. The T-shirt that had been knotted at her waist flapped loose behind her. Theo smoked the cigarette to the bitter end, flipped the butt into the grass, and brushed the ashes off the front of her nightshirt. She called her friend's name again but, this time, within her head. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Addie Citchens on love as an altar.

BOOKS

WHAT GOES AROUND

The stories we tell about female violence.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

When the journalist Elizabeth Flock was in her early twenties, she took a trip to Rome with friends. They hired a guide for a day, a bearded man a few years older. After showing them the sights, he brought them to a bar, the American kind that panders to young tourists with shots, and then to the Trevi Fountain, where they threw pennies over their shoulders. The next thing Flock knew, she was waking up in bed—the guide's. He had drugged her drink. Now he was raping her.

What might have happened, Flock wondered later, if she had had a knife? A gun? In the event, she had nothing, and did nothing. She froze, as many people do. When it was over, she didn't go to the police; she doubted they would help. Her anger grew. Nearly a decade later, she tracked her assailant down online and discovered that he lived, amazingly, in the same city as she did. He ran a furniture store, which she fantasized about burning down. She didn't do that, either, but now she has written a book about women who

From the Furies to "Kill Bill," the figure of the avenging woman, evening the scales, has long entranced the public.

ILLUSTRATION BY IRENE RINALDI

"Good artists borrow. Great artists steal office supplies from work."

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did do something. It's called "The Furies: Women, Vengeance, and Justice" (Harper).

The title is telling. Many ancient cultures represented justice in female form, Flock notes. She mentions the Hindu warrior goddess Durga and the Sumerian goddess Inanna, who is raped by a gardener while sleeping, then sends down plagues to flush him out of hiding. The Furies of ancient Greece and Rome were also divine, a trio of miserable hags with snakes for hair. They appear in Aeschylus' Oresteia, where they hound Orestes after he murders his mother, and, seventeen hundred years later, in Dante's Inferno, where they shriek and tear at their breasts. (Flock doesn't mention the Furies' origin story, but it is a Freudian field day: according to the poet Hesiod, they sprang from drops of blood shed when Cronus, son of Gaia and Uranus, was incited by his mother to cut off his father's testicles.)

Flock's point is that there is a mythic quality to the anger of a wronged woman which crosses cultures, as does the thing that Flock considers to be its source: male domination. The same traits that made the Furies repulsive to men of the past make them awesome to women today, a symbol of female agency in the face of oppression and pain. The Furies, or their descendants, are everywhere. Furiosa, played by Charlize Theron in "Mad Max: Fury Road" (2015) and by Anya Taylor-Joy in the upcoming "Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga," is an ass-kicking, gun-toting liberationist with a mechanical arm who rescues an enslaved harem of women from a mean old despot. She drives stick; she is an action hero, not a miserable hag. The same is true of Rooney Mara's Lisbeth Salander, in "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," and Uma Thurman's Bride, in "Kill Bill." Each of these movies was directed by a man; evidently, the story of a woman getting hers has crossover appeal.

For a while, Flock says, she was drawn to these glorified accounts of female revenge. They galvanized her. It's helpful, when you have been rendered powerless, to feel that others forced into a similar position have triumphed, not only vanquishing their foes but making them suffer in kind. But Flock is a reporter, interested in real people living real lives, so she found three Furies of her own. They are contemporary women who, as she writes, "took matters into their own hands."

Flock's first subject is Brittany Smith, a mother of four from Stevenson, Alabama. In January, 2018, she met Joshua (Todd) Smith (no relation), a roughneck from a nearby town who bred pit bulls, when he sold her one of his dogs. The following night, he convinced Brittany to pick him up from a park, where he was stranded in the snow. Todd was known as a Jekyll-and-Hyde type, Flock writes—sweet when sober, terrifying when high on a cocktail of meth and Xanax. Back at Brittany's house, Hyde took over. Brittany later testified that Todd violently raped her, strangling her until she passed out. Eventually, she managed to get word to her younger brother Chris, who arrived with a gun. Todd put Chris in a headlock; Brittany took the gun and shot Todd, killing him. After she was arrested and charged with murder, she pleaded not guilty, invoking the state's Stand Your Ground law.

Next comes Angoori Dahariya, born in 1963 to a poor family of Dalit farmers—members of the "untouchable" caste—in northern India. Angoori married a kind man and became a meek housewife and mother, eventually finding work delivering polio vaccines. The couple managed to make a down payment on a small plot of land in the town of Tirwa, where they built a two-room hut; they enrolled their children in good schools. In 1999, the upper-caste owner of the land, which Angoori had been buying in installments, told her that he wanted her family out, and summoned a band of men to forcibly evict them. The humiliation proved radicalizing. During the altercation, Angoori brandished a bamboo cane, called a lathi, and this gave her an idea. She went on to muster a gang of women to punish men for their abuses, training her followers to wield lathis in local disputes.

Finally, there is Cicek Mustafa Zibo, the third of seven girls born to a Kurdish family in northern Syria. In 2013, when she was seventeen, she joined the Y.P.J., the Women's Protection Units, an all-female militia that had been created as a counterpart of the male-led People's Protection Units (Y.P.G.), with the goal of defending a Kurdish homeland in the

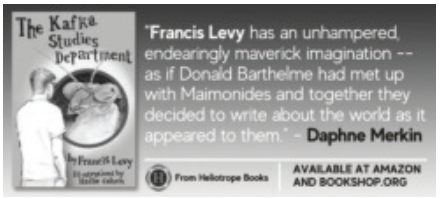
region. Cicek was soon posted to Kobani, a Kurdish-majority city that had come under assault from ISIS militants, where she made a name for herself as a fearless warrior, facing down the enemy without flinching.

It is hard to overstate how different these people are from one another. They live in different parts of the world. They speak different languages. They are of different ages, backgrounds, circumstances, beliefs. If they met on the street—But that would never happen, and that is one reason that Flock has written "The Furies." This sensitively reported book has an ambition similar to that of a Gloria Steinem talking circle. Without drawing explicit connections between these women—each is presented on her own, a separate panel in the triptych—Flock is putting them in conversation with one another. That is a feminist project, and Flock wants us to see her subjects through a feminist lens. One thing that Brittany, Angoori, and Cicek have in common, she writes, is that each is "living within damaging cultures of honor," and she reads their various acts of violence as means of resistance.

Brittany Smith, for example. Flock suggests that if it had been her brother Chris who had shot Todd Smith, he would have been treated more leniently, because of the "good ol' boys club" ethos of the rural South. In fact, Brittany, in a panic, did initially claim that Chris was the shooter. (This later caused problems for her in court.) At first, her brother went along with the lie. "Chris had always heard the same refrain growing up, from his mom, his sister, and other women in Stevenson—that women were treated as second-class citizens in Jackson County, especially by the police," Flock writes. "Chris, on the other hand, could say he was merely standing his ground to protect his sister, as any reasonable man would do." Flock notes that between 2006, when Alabama passed its Stand Your Ground law, and 2010, when it temporarily stopped sending relevant data to the F.B.I., the state did not report any woman winning a justifiable-homicide ruling. In 2019, one did: Jewel Battle, from Huntsville, who had stabbed her male roommate after he choked her during a fight. But that was an exception. The same year, another Alabama woman, Linda Doyle, shot and killed her husband, who her lawyer said had sexually abused her for years. Doyle was found to have stab wounds on her abdomen and inside her vagina; prosecutors argued that she had inflicted these on herself. She was sentenced to ninety-nine years.

Brittany comes out somewhere in between Battle and Doyle. When Flock first wrote about her—for this magazine, in 2020—she had not yet had her Stand Your Ground hearing. When she does, things don't go well. Brittany's memory is questioned, and so is her truthfulness. A physical examination after her assault showed that her body was covered in bruises and abrasions, but no semen was found at the crime scene, so the prosecution casts doubt on the rape. Flock lets you know what she thinks about the people whose job it is to poke holes in Brittany's credibility. (One of them, an investigator brought in as a witness for the prosecution, is described as having "a weasel-like face.") Brittany is unsuccessful in the hearing; the judge, a woman, writes a nineteen-page ruling explaining that she had failed to prove that she acted in self-defense. Eventually, rather than go to trial, Brittany pleads guilty to murder. She receives a twenty-year sentence, but is released after seven months, plus time served.

It is enraging to read about the legal gantlet that Brittany endures because she tried to protect herself from sadistic abuse. But an interesting thing happens as Flock continues to follow her. At first, Brittany seems heroic, not so much for shooting her assailant as for facing down a court system set against her. As her ordeal drags on, though, Brittany runs into problems. Like many of her neighbors in Jackson County, she had once been addicted to meth—she lost custody of her kids, and was trying to regain it when she met Todd—and eventually she relapses. Also, she meets a new man, Michael, who seems nice but, she says, can turn aggressive when drunk. One day, in his trailer, he pours a beer over Brittany's head. When he is gone, she lights his mattresses on fire, and is jailed for arson. "Brittany had never been a perfect victim for trial," Flock writes, citing the work of Nils Christie, the Norwegian criminologist who came up with the idea of the "ideal victim"—someone who, as Flock puts it, is "weak, doing something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respectable, in a place they couldn't be blamed for being, and hurt by a big and bad, unknown offender." She turns out not to be an ideal avenger of injustice, either. Some of her supporters feel let down when she accepts the plea deal; her mother is heartbroken. The warrior was a mere woman, after all.

That tension, the real versus the ideal, crops up again and again in Flock's project. "Neither saints, nor whores, only women," her book's epigraph reads, but her attachment to the mythic is hard to shake. Cicek, the Kurdish fighter, is the character who comes closest to embodying the figure of a Fury. Look at her go, blowing the heads off ISIS militants with her Kalashnikov! You see why Flock wanted to include her. Here was a woman who feared that she would be married off in her teens and instead got to act as a liberator of her people, doing battle with a murderous, misogynist foe. But the thing that makes her such a good soldier in the field—her single-mindedness—also makes her a bit boring on the page. Flock gets pulpy when she describes Cicek imagining "Turkish mercenaries invading her village, boots stomping into her parents' home, and her sisters violated by faceless men in uniform." Even Cicek admits that her "kills" begin to blur together in her mind. There is a deep compassion in Flock's account, but here and there you see her wrestle with her journalistic skepticism, wondering whether her subject is quite who she wishes to be.

The trickiest, and most intriguing, character in this regard is Angoori Dahariya. Her trajectory is even more astonishing than Cicek's. No recruiting militia passed through her village; her transformation from obedient housewife to swaggering gang leader was accomplished by sheer force of will. Angoori did have a model, though: Phoolan Devi, India's so-called Bandit Queen. Devi, born the same year as Angoori, and in the same state, Uttar Pradesh, was a low-caste woman who was married off as a child. She escaped from her husband and was kidnapped by a group of bandits, then became a bandit herself, earning a reputation as a Robin Hood who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. She was also known for exacting vigilante justice on men who had harmed women. In one notorious incident, her gang was accused of massacring some twenty men in a village where she said she had been raped. Exploits like these made her a national legend. She died the death of a legend, too. After spending eleven years in prison, she was cleared of all charges, elected to parliament, and then assassinated in 2001.

Experts have ranked India among the world's most dangerous countries for women; it's no wonder that people might prefer a larger-than-life protectress to indifferent or corrupt authorities. The same is true in other places where gendered violence tends to go unpunished. In the early twenty-tens, after two bus drivers in Mexico were shot dead at point-blank range, a woman calling herself Diana, Huntress of Bus Drivers claimed responsibility, declaring that she had avenged the rapes of female passengers. This is the sort of grand persona that Angoori aspires to. At first, Flock writes, "her goal was simple: to prevent injustices like the one she'd faced." When a junior engineer at Tirwa's electricity department is believed to be defrauding locals, Angoori directs her gang to cane him and then to humiliate him by dressing him in women's clothes; he is reassigned to another district, and the town's bills go down. As she tastes power, though, her motives and methods become less pure. Angoori coerces one fearful mother into reporting her daughter's rape by kidnapping the woman and promising a pension that Angoori is in no position to provide; she sets a police station on fire. She gets involved with politics, and people start to mutter that she is corrupt. "Her self-mythologizing was part of her success," Flock writes. When she meets with Angoori, she is struck by the way Angoori's followers laugh and cry when she does, amplifying the performance. "Angoori is like God, mother, and father," one of them says.

Flock is dealing with that famous type, the unreliable narrator, but she can't help wanting to believe. Sometimes she makes her doubt clear. Does Angoori perhaps regret thrashing a young girl, married off at fifteen, because her par-

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh—I've never heard anyone meow at the moon before."

ents complained that the girl had left her husband for another man? Angoori doesn't care. She is brash and fun, in the way that TV mobsters are fun. She carries a fake Guess bag and hires a private car to take her around. Why should only men get to be gang bosses? This kind of egotism is not the same thing as feminism, but it's often mistaken for it. Flock knows the difference. Still, she wraps up her story hopefully, with a moral for us to take home. "Canes should only be wielded against the powerful," Angoori dutifully says to her, and Flock lets her say it, though it's just a politician's line, telling the people what they want to hear.

Most women who turn to violence are not running around with lathis or warring with ISIS. They may not even be avenging themselves on their abusers, though often they have endured terrible abuse. They tend to hurt the people closest to them: their partners, their children, or themselves. This awful reality is reflected in "If Love Could Kill" (Knopf), a new book by Anna Motz. Ignore the tacky title; the majority of the people Motz writes about are neither killers nor driven by an excess of love. Her real concern, as her plainer subtitle has it, is "The Myths and Truths of the Women Who Commit Violence," and what she has to say on the truths front is distressing in the extreme.

Motz grew up in New York, trained as a clinical psychologist, and has spent her thirty-year career in England, where she works as a forensic psychotherapist. This, she explains, means that she brings "the psychoanalytic approach into the field of criminality," using talk therapy to help her patients identify the "unconscious influences" that have led them to where they are today: often prison, or a secure hospital ward. Motz treats both men and women, but women are her specialty. "Many are angry, aggressive, and intimidating, but in equal parts frightened, vulnerable, and traumatized," she writes. They are also "considered 'harder work'" than "the vast majority of our referrals—men with long histories of violent crime."

Motz's book makes clear why. None of its ten chapters, each of which gives a pseudonymous account of a patient, is easy to read, and some are excruciating. There is Grace, who feigned or

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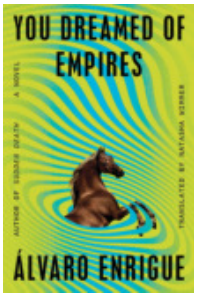
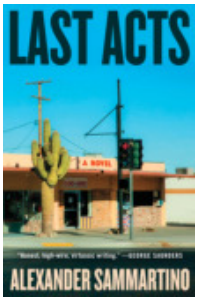
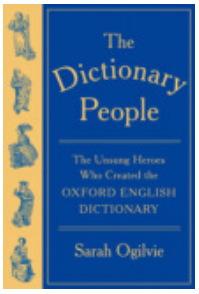


You Dreamed of Empires, *by Álvaro Enrigue, translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer (Riverhead)*. This incantatory novel takes place in 1519, on the day when Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors arrived at Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. As they await an audience with the mercurial, mushroom-addled emperor, Moctezuma, the conquistadors navigate his labyrinthine palace, stumble upon sacrificial temples, and tend to their horses, all the while wondering if they are truly guests or, in fact, prisoners. Enrigue conjures both court intrigue and city life with grace. In metafictional flashes to present-day Mexico City, which sits atop Tenochtitlan's ruins, and a startling counterhistorical turn, the novel becomes a meditation on the early colonizers, their legacy, and the culture that they subsumed.



Last Acts, *by Alexander Sammartino (Scribner)*. The events of this satirical début novel are catalyzed by a nearly fatal opioid overdose suffered by the estranged son of a gun-store proprietor. Together, the father and son embark on a journey across the Arizona desert, endeavoring to save their failing business from bankruptcy, overcome drug addiction, and heal their traumatized relationship. Their attempt to salvage the store rests on producing a commercial in which the son claims that firearms offered him "purpose" and solved his addiction problems. This premise may be ridiculous, but, as the son reminds himself, "reality is made by testimonials."



The Dictionary People, *by Sarah Ogilvie (Knopf)*. Unlike previous English dictionaries, the Oxford English Dictionary aimed to document not how words should be used but how they were actually used. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, thousands of people copied snippets from their reading onto slips of paper and mailed them to Oxford, where they were sorted and analyzed. This eclectic group, whom Ogilvie portrays with humor and affection, included vicars, murderers, Karl Marx's daughter, and members of Virginia Woolf's father's walking club. When the O.E.D. was published, in 1928, it comprised more than four hundred thousand entries and almost two million quotations—an achievement that was possible only through the work of these "faithful" volunteers.

Melancholy Wedgwood, *by Iris Moon (MIT)*. In this unorthodox history, Moon, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, casts aside the traditional, heroic portrait of the English ceramicist and entrepreneur Josiah Wedgwood and envisions the potter as a symbol of Britain's post-colonial melancholia. Touching lightly on the well-trodden terrain of Wedgwood's biography, Moon focusses on the story's "leftovers," among them the amputation of Wedgwood's leg; his wayward son, Tom; the figure of the Black man in his famous antislavery medallion; and the overworked laborers in his factory. Moon's overarching thesis—that destructiveness is inherent in colonialism, industrialization, and capitalism—is nothing groundbreaking, but her mode of attack, at once bold and surreptitious, succeeds in challenging the established, too-cozy narrative about her subject.

caused the illnesses that frequently landed her daughter in the hospital, and Skye, twenty-three and in jail for an assault conviction, who compulsively ties ligatures around her neck. Tania live-streamed her torture of an acquaintance. Lillian stabbed her abusive husband to death; Paula is abusive to her own husband, who shrinks before her rages. Worst are two cases of egregious harm caused by mothers: Amber, a woman who has sexually abused a number of children, including her own daughter, and Dolores, who, operating under the psychotic delusion that she had to protect her two daughters from a pedophile ring, attacked them both with an icepick and drowned the younger one in the bath.

Motz's job requires her to manage her feelings toward her patients, not to discount them, and she doesn't hesitate to acknowledge when she is overcome by revulsion. In the case of Amber, who seems to have no remorse for what she has done, she quotes D. W. Winnicott's idea that an analyst's obligation to remain objective toward a patient may sometimes require her "to be able to hate the patient objectively." Another difficulty is managing the conflict between her feminist beliefs and the reality of some of these women's crimes. "As a feminist, I was naturally disposed to see first the horror of domestic violence and to think primarily of the countless, often voiceless victims of toxic masculinity—abused or killed in a society that has consistently normalized the dehumanization of women and girls," Motz writes in the chapter devoted to Lillian. "Yet as a forensic psychotherapist I also knew that sometimes it is the woman who is the intimate partner terrorist, using tyranny to protect herself from the shame and terror she herself feels."

Really, these are two sides of the same coin. Few of the women Motz treats are sui-generis psychopaths. "These women are not the inhuman monsters of tabloid myth," she writes. "They are not, in fact, so different from the vast majority of us, for their crimes are often the cruel result of the emotions we all share—the longing to love and be loved, the frustration and fear of parenthood, the corrosion of shame and self-loathing." This uncomfortable idea, that very little separates us from *them*, may be one reason that people don't want to believe that women are capable of terrible things. When we are forced to acknowledge it—when we read in the news about a Myra Hindley or a Ghislaine Maxwell—we curse them as monsters, devils, "manifestations of pure evil." The same things that allowed such women to operate for so long with impunity—the mask of their sex, the sentimentalization of femininity—seal their damnation in the public mind.

Is glorification the best way to correct for this? Like Flock, Motz is interested in the lore of female vengeance: Judith beheading Holofernes, Medea killing her sons to spite Jason, Clytemnestra stabbing Agamemnon in the bath. But she finds such legends obfuscating rather than inspiring. Women's violence may look like an expression of agency, but it is the opposite, a reaction and a repetition. It is not triumphant or wicked. It's sordid, cyclical, and sad.

As a reader of violence, Motz sees many of her patients' acts as attempts at communication, wishes "to be caught, stopped, and punished." Helping them reach a deeper understanding of their pain, she thinks, might teach them how to handle it in a way that doesn't cause pain to others.

Sometimes the act of interpretation itself can liberate a person. This turns out to be the case with Grace, the patient who was making her daughter sick. In medical terms, you could simply say that Grace had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, the condition made famous by the grisly case of Dee Dee Blanchard, the mother who was eventually killed by the boyfriend of the daughter she had forced to live as an invalid. What Motz wants to know is why. Her early sessions with Grace are unproductive and combative. Grace is paranoid, fearful, furious. She thinks Motz is trying to take her daughter away. Motz despairs of making progress. Gradually, though, she comes to see Grace's actions as expressing a need for attention connected to her own early experience of emotional neglect. Doctors represented a powerful source of authority and comfort, and, as an adult, she stayed in this fantasy world, sucking her helpless child into it with her. After many sessions, Grace begins to soften. She starts working outside the home; she grows closer to her husband. She stops needing to see herself as her daughter's nurse and is able to retain custody of her. "If Love Could Kill" is not a boastful record of one success after another. Some patients do remain beyond Motz's reach. But her successes are moving because they give hope. They show that people can surprise themselves with change.

One of the book's most affecting stories is that of Mary, a patient whom Motz treated when she was first starting out. As a teen-ager, Mary was molested by her father; as a young woman, she had a son with a man who abused her. Because she found herself unable to leave him, child services took the boy away. One day, alone in her apartment, Mary set fire to the curtains. No one was hurt. Mary was arrested for arson, sent to prison, and then to a secure hospital designed for men, where she kept to herself. Each time she was on the verge of being discharged, though, she would harm herself, cutting or burning her body. When Motz meets her, Mary is forty-five. She has been living in this suspended state for more than twenty years.

On a practical level, Mary's acts of violence produce a predictable effect: when she hurts herself, she is cared for by nursing staff. But Motz reads arson committed by women in a specific way, as "an expression of extreme feelings for which they have no other outlet." It requires no strength; anyone can do it. Also, it "can appear to hold the promise of purification: a desperate attempt by people who have suffered appalling abuse to not only communicate their repressed anger but destroy the evidence of their own pain." Think of Brittany Smith, setting her boyfriend's mattresses ablaze. She couldn't say why she had lit the match. "I know I wasn't trying to burn the house down," she said. Maybe she was trying to send up a flare.

And think of Flock, who once imagined burning down her rapist's store. Instead of destroying a building, she created a book. During her reporting, she writes, she suffered from chronic fatigue and stomach pain. When she was finished, her body healed. A fire can damage, or it can give light and warmth. It can be a place to gather, to share stories late into the night. ♦

ALAMY

A portrait of Spinoza by Franz Wulfhagen, painted in 1664.

BOOKS

THE RETICENT RADICAL

Baruch Spinoza's quiet revolution.

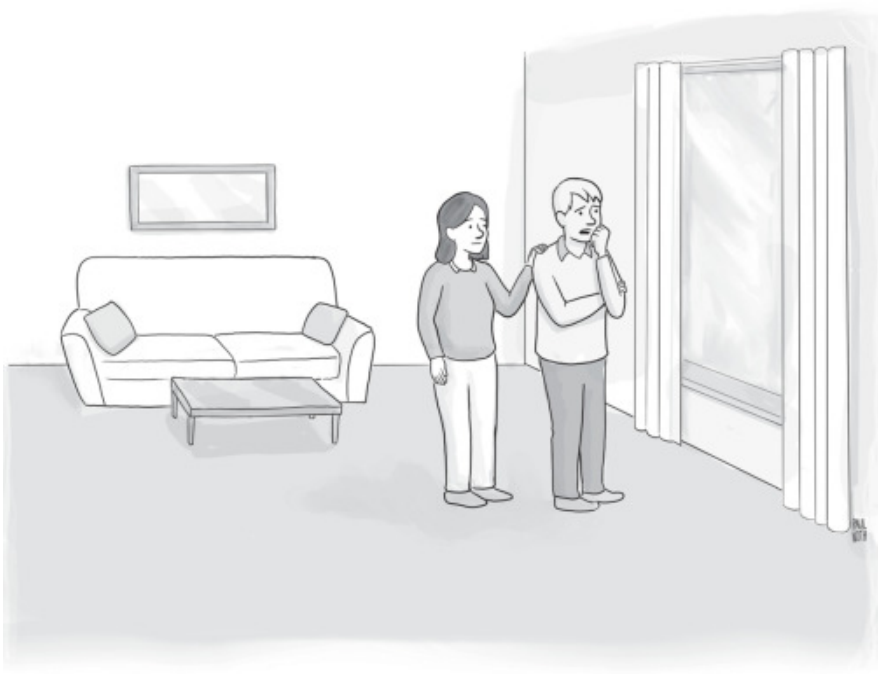
BY ADAM KIRSCH

In March, 1668, Adriaan Koerbagh, a Dutch physician in his mid-thirties, hired Johannes Van Eede, a printer in Utrecht, to publish his new book, "A Light Shining in Dark Places, to Shed Light on Matters of Theology and Religion." But Van Eede, after setting the first half of the manuscript, became uneasy about its highly unorthodox contents. Koerbagh argued that God is not a Trinity, as the Dutch Reformed Church taught, but an infinite and eternal substance that includes everything in existence. In his view, Jesus was just a human being, the Bible is not Holy Writ, and good and evil are merely terms we use for what benefits or harms us. The only reason people believe in the doctrine of Christianity, Koerbagh wrote, is that religious authorities "forbid people to investigate and order them to believe everything they say without examination, and they try to murder (if they do not escape) those who question things and thus arrive at knowledge and truth, as has happened many thousands of times."

Now it was about to happen to Koerbagh himself. Van Eede, either outraged because of his religious beliefs or worried about his own legal liability, stopped work and turned over the manuscript to the sheriff of Utrecht, who in turn informed the sheriff of Amsterdam. Koerbagh was already well known to the authorities there; in February, they had seized all copies of his previous book, "A Flower Garden of All Sorts of Delights," in which he had denied the existence of miracles and divine revelation. Realizing that he was in danger, Koerbagh went on the run, ending up in Leiden, where he disguised himself with a black wig. But a reward was offered and in July someone turned him in. Koerbagh was interrogated, tried, and sentenced to ten years in prison for blasphemy, to be followed by ten years of exile. The long sentence turned out to be unnecessary: he lasted just a year in prison before dying, in October, 1669.

A few months later, an even more subversive book was published in Amsterdam: "Tractatus Theologico-Politicus," an anonymous Latin treatise that declared the best policy in religious matters to be "allowing every man to think what he likes, and say what he thinks." In the preface, the author gave thanks for the "rare happiness of living in a republic, where everyone's judgment is free and unshackled, where each may worship God as his conscience dictates, and where freedom is esteemed before all things dear and precious." But the fact that the author withheld his name, and that the book's Amsterdam publisher claimed on the title page that it had been printed in Hamburg, told another story. The author and the publisher were well aware that their unshackled judgment could put them in shackles.

These feints couldn't stop readers, or the authorities, from quickly figuring out that the "Tractatus" was the work of Baruch Spinoza. Although Spinoza, then in his late thirties, had previously published only one book, a guide to the fashionable philosophy of René Descartes, he was one of Amsterdam's most notorious freethinkers. As a young man, he had been expelled from the city's Jewish community for his heretical views on God and the Bible. (He published under the name Benedictus de Spinoza, Benedictus being the Latin equivalent of Baruch, which means "blessed" in Hebrew.) Living a quiet, solitary existence, supporting himself by grinding lenses for microscopes and telescopes, Spinoza developed his ideas



"I'm not worrying—I'm warding off tragedies by constantly anticipating them."

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into a comprehensive philosophical system, which he shared with a circle of friends in letters and conversations. When Koerbagh was interrogated, he was asked whether he had fallen under Spinoza's malign influence. He acknowledged that they were friends, but insisted that they had never discussed ideas—even though what he wrote about God closely resembled what Spinoza had been saying for years.

Ministers in several cities immediately forbade booksellers to carry the "Tractatus," and, in 1674, it was officially banned in the Netherlands, along with Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan." Under the circumstances, Spinoza's praise of Dutch freedom might well sound sarcastic. But the truth is that, compared with most of Europe in the seventeenth century, the Netherlands really was a haven of tolerance. In Spain or Italy, a book like Spinoza's could get its author burned by the Inquisition; as it was, the attacks were aimed at his ideas, not his life. His praise of his country is better seen as a kind of appeal: Perhaps no country in Europe was truly free, but the Netherlands might be if it tried.

For Ian Buruma, a writer and historian and a former editor of *The New York Review of Books*, it is Spinoza's dedication to freedom of thought—what he called *libertas philosophandi*—that makes him a thinker for our moment. In his new book, "Spinoza: Freedom's Messiah," a short biography in Yale University Press's Jewish Lives series, Buruma observes that "intellectual freedom has once again become an important issue, even in countries, such as the United States, that pride themselves on being uniquely free."

No American has to fear Adriaan Koerbagh's fate, no matter how unpopular his or her opinions. Still, Buruma argues, "liberal thinking is being challenged from many sides where ideologies are increasingly entrenched, by bigoted reactionaries as well as by progressives who believe there can be no deviation from their chosen paths to justice." And it is certainly true that, in the age of social media, informal pressure to toe a certain line can be as effective as legal threats. Offending the wrong people, even for a moment, can blow up the career of anyone from a Y.A. novelist to an Ivy League president.

In calling Spinoza a "messiah," Buruma follows Heinrich Heine, the nineteenth-century German Jewish poet, who compared the philosopher to "his divine cousin, Jesus Christ. Like him, he suffered for his teachings. Like him, he wore the crown of thorns." According to Jonathan Israel, a historian whose encyclopedic biography "Spinoza, Life and Legend" came out last year, "No other personage of his era came even close to being so decried, denounced and condemned in weighty texts of exhaustive length, over so long a span of time, in Latin, Dutch, French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, and other languages."

Like deconstruction or critical race theory, "Spinozism" became a popular target for many a moralist who could not have said exactly what it meant. Yet, although Spinoza was certainly a champion of political and intellectual freedom, he had no interest in being a martyr for them, and, if his life teaches anything about thinking in dangerous times, it is how prudence and boldness can go hand in hand. Not for nothing did he wear a ring inscribed with the Latin word "*Caute*": "Be cautious."

The boldest act of defiance in Spinoza's life came at the beginning of his career as a philosopher, and made that career possible. In July, 1656, when he was twenty-three years old, Spinoza was cast out of Amsterdam's Jewish community in a public ceremony. There are few contemporary sources for Spinoza's early life, and it's not known precisely what led to this rupture.

But the text of the ban, or *herem*, read aloud at a synagogue on Amsterdam's Houtgracht canal, has been preserved, and it makes clear that what the community objected to was not any personal misdeed but Spinoza's "evil opinions" and "abominable heresies," which he refused to recant under pressure. For this reason, the leaders of the congregation declared, Spinoza "should be excommunicated and expelled from the people of Israel." They invoked the fearsome punishment for disobedience laid down by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy: "Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in."

Spinoza wasn't present to hear this

curse read aloud, but he couldn't escape its effects. The Jewish community into which he was born, in 1632, was uniquely close-knit, set off not only from the Dutch Christians around it but from other Jewish communities in Western Europe. Amsterdam's Jews were descended from Portuguese *conversos*, Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism at the end of the fifteenth century, who continued to practice their faith in secret for generations. Spinoza's parents and grandparents were among the many Portuguese Jews who moved to the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, drawn by the promise of religious tolerance as well as commercial opportunities. Buruma, Dutch-born and Jewish on his mother's side, notes that Spinoza and his brother were the first members of their family "in many generations to be born as a Jew, and not a crypto-Jew."

Buruma writes that Spinoza's excommunication was like being " 'canceled,' as people might now say," but this was a retribution that a Twitter mob could only dream of. Under the terms of the *herem*, all Jews, including Spinoza's relatives, were forbidden to talk to or even go near him. He could no longer hope to live among the people he had known all his life, to do business with them, or to get married and start a family. The fact that Spinoza was willing to sacrifice everything for his right to think and speak freely shows how seriously he took *libertas philosophandi*, before he had published a word of philosophy.

Spinoza's apostasy also makes him a key figure in modern Jewish history. He was hardly the first Jew to abandon Judaism, but he might have been the first to do so publicly without becoming a Christian or a Muslim. Instead, he fashioned a secular life, something that was hardly conceivable before the seventeenth century. In the "Tractatus," he argued that, in a commercial state like the Netherlands, traditional religious identities no longer had any real meaning, anyway: "Matters have long since come to such a pass, that one can only pronounce a man Christian, Turk, Jew, or Heathen, by his general appearance and attire, by his frequenting this or that place of worship, or employing the phraseology of a particular sect—as for manner of life, it is in all cases the same."

For members of later generations of European Jews hoping to emancipate themselves from religion, such as Heine and Sigmund Freud, this independence made Spinoza a role model. As Buruma writes, "He chose to think freely, and that made his tribal membership impossible." Instead, Spinoza assembled his own tribe of like-minded individuals, most of them freethinking liberal Protestants. Israel and another eminent Spinoza biographer, Steven Nadler, have shed light on these key relationships. Franciscus van den Enden, Spinoza's Latin teacher and sometime landlord, was a former Jesuit who drew up a plan for a utopian society in New Netherland, the Dutch colony that became New York; he ended up being hanged by the French for helping to hatch a plot against Louis XIV. Lodewijk Meyer, a leading figure in Dutch literary life, is believed to be the author of an anonymous book, published in 1666, that caused a huge scandal by arguing that the Bible should be analyzed critically and scientifically. Johannes Bouwmeester co-founded a club for freethinkers with the defiant name Nil Volentibus Arduum ("Nothing Is Difficult for the Willing").

Such figures helped to create what Israel calls the Radical Enlightenment, a tradition of political and religious thought that would transform the modern world. Democratic ideas that were punishable by imprisonment in the sixteen-sixties became the watchwords of the American and French Revolutions a century later. Today, the propositions about God and the Bible that sent Adriaan Koerbagh to prison are taken for granted by secular people around the world, especially in the Netherlands, where fifty-seven per cent of those fifteen years and older say they have no religion.

Many thinkers shared the ideas of the Radical Enlightenment, but it was Spinoza who forced Europe to reckon with them, by rooting them in a new philosophical system of formidable scope and rigor. When Spinoza writes that democracy is "of all forms of government the most natural, and the most consonant with individual liberty," and that the best antidote to superstition is the study of science, "since the less men know of nature the more easily can they coin fictitious ideas," he isn't simply stating opinions. The title page of his magnum opus, the "Ethics," promises that his ideas will be "*ordine geometrico demonstrata*," "demonstrated in the manner of geometry," and, like Euclid, he presents his arguments in the form of numbered axioms and propositions. Once you accept Spinoza's basic assumptions about God and the universe, his political and social ideas are supposed to be as self-evident as the Pythagorean theorem.

At the center of Spinoza's thought is a new way of understanding God. Indeed, his God was so different from the one worshipped in churches and synagogues that almost everyone who read him believed he was an atheist. But Spinoza indignantly rejected the charge of atheism, and nowhere in the "Ethics" does he deny the existence of God. What he denies is that God exists as a being or intelligence separate from the rest of the universe, as he is conceived of in Judaism and Christianity. Spinoza's argument is disconcertingly simple. God is "a being absolutely infinite," and the idea of infinity "involves no negation": it would be contradictory to say that there is some quality an infinite being does not possess or some space it does not occupy. It is therefore impossible for God to be somewhere—up in Heaven, perhaps—but not here, where we are. If God exists, then he must be absolutely everywhere; not even our own bodies and minds can be separate from him. As Proposition XV of the "Ethics" famously states, "Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived."

This idea is known as pantheism, from the Greek for "all" and "God." One way of looking at pantheism is that it brings us closer to God than conventional religious belief ever could; in the nineteenth century, Romantic writers considered Spinoza a "God-intoxicated man." But, if there is no difference or distance between God and the rest of

the universe, then he cannot do any of the things that we ordinarily think of God as doing: hearing prayers, working miracles, creating the world with a "Let there be light." Really, there is no compelling reason to call Spinoza's infinite substance God in the first place. We might as well call it Being, or Everything, or Nature. In Part IV of the "Ethics," Spinoza refers to "the eternal and infinite Being, which we call God or Nature"—in Latin, *Deus sive natura*.

In closing the gap between humanity, God, and nature, Spinoza also does away with any space for free will. The infinite substance that is God appears to be constantly changing, yet always in accordance with what Spinoza calls "the necessity of his nature," or what a scientist would call natural laws. The ancient Greek engineer Archimedes said that with a lever and a place to stand he could move the Earth, but in Spinoza's universe there is no place outside nature where we can stand in order to exert force on it, since we ourselves are part of nature.

This might sound like a fatalistic view of the world, and for later thinkers the idea that the universe is nothing but a mechanism in motion, constantly changing but never going anywhere, was a recipe for nihilism and despair. But one of the things that draws people to Spinoza, and makes him perhaps the most beloved philosopher since Socrates, is his confident equanimity. He argues that the highest happiness of which human beings are capable is seeing the universe "under the aspect of eternity," which means understanding that everything is as it must be. When he writes that "blessedness is nothing else but the contentment of spirit, which arises from the intuitive knowledge of God," he might sound like a mystic, but for him knowing God is not a supernatural experience but a rational one. It simply means knowing "the actions which follow from the necessity of his nature," in the same way that knowing the law of gravity allows us to understand why an object thrown with a certain force will follow a certain trajectory.

It is because Spinoza sees true understanding as the key to happiness that he insists on freedom of thought. When religious authorities tell people what to believe, they make it harder to achieve a correct idea of God, and thus block the road to blessedness. Spinoza advocated for democratic government because he thought that it was more likely than monarchy or aristocracy to preserve *libertas philosophandi*, and thus to make it possible for human beings to become happy. As he writes in the "Tractatus," "The basis and aim of a democracy is to avoid the desires as irrational, and to bring men as far as possible under the control of reason, so that they may live in peace and harmony."

Clearly, this is not a description of the society we live in today. Liberal democracy as we know it rests on a certain intuition about equality: if all people are created equal, then no one has a monopoly on truth or wisdom, so no one has the right to dictate to others without their consent. This makes democracy a recipe for constant disagreement, as individuals and groups argue their way to some kind of acceptable consensus.

This was not the way Spinoza thought about freedom. He believed that there was one truth, which he understood and most people did not, and his experiences with religion and politics left him with no illusions about the wisdom of the crowd. Buruma, who excels at setting a rather unworldly man in the public life of his time, describes how, in 1672, a mob in The Hague lynched Johan and Cornelis de Witt, brothers who had led the Netherlands' liberal regime during what is now remembered as the Dutch Golden Age. "One man tried to bite off Cornelis's testicles," Buruma writes. "Women danced in a frenzy after wrapping themselves in the slippery intestines." Spinoza, who was living "only a short walk away," wept at the news and had to be physically restrained from going to the site of the massacre to set up a placard reading "*Ultimi barbarorum*," "the lowest of barbarians."

As a freethinker who had run afoul of both Judaism and Christianity, Spinoza knew that bigotry and fanaticism weren't just imposed on the people; they were also imposed by the people. Part of the reason he never met a fate like Koerbagh's is that he took care not to provoke the crowd. Koerbagh wrote his books in Dutch so that anyone could read them, but Spinoza stuck to Latin, the language of the learned élite. In the preface to the "Tractatus," he declares that he is writing only for philosophers and discourages "the multitude, and those of like passions with the multitude," from reading the book: "I would rather that they should utterly neglect it, than that they should misinterpret it after their wont."

When the "Tractatus" provoked a hostile reaction anyway, Spinoza decided not to publish anything else. He also turned down an offer to become a professor at the University of Heidelberg, on the ground that holding an official position would expose him to even more attacks. All of his work, including the "Ethics," was left in manuscript form for his friends to print after his death. He died relatively young, in 1677, at the age of forty-four, of a lung condition that may have been linked to glass particles inhaled while grinding lenses.

To Leo Strauss, one of Spinoza's most influential twentieth-century interpreters, this caution put him in a long philosophical tradition. In 1941, Strauss, who had fled Nazi Germany and was teaching with other Jewish refugees at the New School, in New York, published an essay titled "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in which he argued that the repression and censorship then reigning in totalitarian Europe represented a return to the historical norm. Ever since Socrates was put to death by the Athenian assembly, philosophers had known that it was dangerous to speak the whole truth in public. When it comes to politics and religion, Strauss wrote, "a man of independent thought can utter his views in public and remain unharmed, provided he moves with circumspection. He can even utter them in print without incurring any danger, provided he is capable of writing between the lines."

Strauss considered Spinoza a classic example of this "esoteric" style of writing, noting that the "*Caute*" on his ring referred to "the caution that the philosopher needs in his intercourse with non-philosophers." If, as Buruma warns, we are entering an era in which "freedom of thought is under threat from secular theologies," Spinoza may be the role model we need: a thinker who spoke the most outrageous truths he knew, and still managed to die in his bed. ♦

THE NEW YORKER

The Runaway Princesses

FROM In the Dark

Why do the women in Dubai's royal family keep trying to flee? A four-part podcast tells the story of a powerful sheikh and the women who risked everything to escape him.

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In recent years, the food world has fixated on specialty condiments.

ON AND OFF THE MENU

PUCKER UP

The offbeat indulgence of handmade vinegar.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

A couple of weeks ago, Chris Crawford, a former restaurant chef who prefers to be called a cook, gave me a tour of the place that she refers to as her "factory." The description is technically true, but it's also funny, considering that it's a single room in which Crawford usually works alone. The eleven-hundred-square-foot space, situated on a high floor of a building in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, is equipped with an induction burner, a microscope, and a big sink, plus bouquets of lemon verbena and whole persimmons hanging from the ceiling to dry. About half the room is occupied by tall shelving units, lined with hundreds of large plastic pails. Crawford, a petite forty-one-year-old with elfin features, is the founder and the sole full-time employee of a company called Tart Vinegar. She has made a name for herself selling vinegar fermented from a surprising array of ingredients: celery, lavender, rose with sour cherry and Concord grape (a variety she markets as True Romance). Prying off the lid of one bucket, and then another, she dipped in a ladle, bringing the vinegar to her lips as if it were soup, and encouraged me to do the same.

Many vinegars taste overwhelmingly of acid, which might seem like the point—until you try Crawford's, which are more flavorful than sharp. You can sip them without wincing; they're as suited for spiking soda water or cookie icing as they are for finishing a soup or a salad. A young batch we tasted, made from fresh bay leaves, could convert the staunchest skeptic of that herb: it was powerfully earthy but also citrusy and a bit sweet. A finished yuzu vinegar captured the fruit's essence better than its juice alone could. Gesturing to another variety, which she'd decided wasn't good enough to sell, Crawford said, "This one was just me driving on Long Island and finding a bunch of dandelion greens." As she explained her process, I thought of Roald Dahl's "The BFG," about a (big, friendly) giant who uses a butterfly net to capture dreams, floating freely in the air, to be stored in glass jars and dispensed into the minds of sleeping children. The work Crawford does is complex, requiring both a high level of technical skill and a chef's palate, but she tends to characterize herself as merely the shepherd of a magnificent natural process. "It's actually super simple," Crawford insisted again and again, in the stoner-adjacent cadence of someone who grew up in the Pacific Northwest, which she did.

Each bucket of vinegar begins with a single ingredient, which Crawford uses to make a mash, adding water, sugar, and yeast as needed. She also blends in a bit of "mother"—the placenta-like collection of cellulose that forms in anything fermented—from a previous batch, which contains enough finished vinegar, rich in bacteria and fungi, to inoculate a new batch. The mixture ferments over a period of days or weeks, turning alcoholic as the yeast eats the sugar, then ferments again, over some months, becoming vinegar.

The finished products age for about a year, but Crawford tastes them constantly—"I'm looking for a flavor profile that, like, hits the back of my throat," she said—and is unsentimental about dumping out the failures. When she nails it, she decants the vinegar into glass bottles, labelled with charmingly naïf illustrations, by her friend Rob Moss Wilson, of naked ladies riding bicycles, soaking in tubs,

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FULFORD & TAMARA SHOPSIN

or draped languidly on tree branches. Unless you buy more than one bottle from the same batch, you may never taste the same vinegar twice: Crawford's method is one that eschews predictability in exchange for sporadically transcendent results.

In metaphor, vinegar tends to get a bad, or at least a vulgar, rap. (See: "piss and.") In the epic poem "Don Juan," written in the early nineteenth century, Lord Byron likened it to marriage after passion has faded: "like vinegar from wine—A sad, sour sober beverage—by time Is sharpened from its high celestial flavor Down to a very homely household savor." Michael Harlan Turkell, the author of a book called "Acid Trip: Travels in the World of Vinegar," told me its invention was likely an accidental by-product of winemaking. "It's not like we can talk to the Babylonians," he said, "but there's no way that vinegar was made with intent." Throughout its history, vinegar has mostly had a humble status. In some cultures, it serves as a cheap beverage, and it takes a backstage role in cuisines all over the world, used for pickling and preserving and disappearing pragmatically into sauces and marinades. The most beleaguered of all vinegars is, of course, distilled white, as much a workhorse of the cleaning closet as it is a pantry staple. An advertorial handbook published by Heinz suggests more than a hundred ways of deploying it: washing teakettles and carpets; launching a toy boat across a bathtub (you'll need baking soda, too); sprucing up a horse's coat.

In the U.S., vinegar has enjoyed the murky prestige of being hailed as a health food. Among the loudest evangelists was a naturopath named Paul C. Bragg, who, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties in Los Angeles, became a wellness adviser to the stars and then to the broader public. The "Bragg Healthy Lifestyle," which he promoted in newspaper columns, books, and public appearances, relied heavily on apple-cider vinegar, which he produced and sold himself, with great success; today, it's hard to find a grocery store in the U.S. that doesn't carry Bragg's. A volume called "Apple Cider Vinegar: Miracle Health System," published by the company, claims it as a cure-all. "How did I beat cancer, obesity, diabetes, strep, three herniated disks and excruciating pain?" a man from Hawaii named Len asks in one of the book's testimonials. The answer: "having the amazing organic apple cider drink daily."

"Drinking a shot of apple-cider vinegar for your gut health is like putting a gallon of bleach in the Gowanus Canal and saying, 'O.K., we can swim in it now,'" Crawford told me, with more than a hint of exasperation. For her, vinegar's potency has much less to do with wellness than with the pursuit of flavor. She began making it in her twenties, when she was living in San Francisco and working in the kitchens of restaurants including Chez Panisse and Mission Chinese. Her roommate, a wine rep, was happy to let her experiment on half-drunk bottles. "There's a real hardiness to being a line cook because you make no money, but you have this palate—you want really good things, and so you're really thrifty," she said. "I lived off of sardines, Ak-Mak crackers, and hot sauce for years." Vinegar, she realized, was an affordable "underdog of an ingredient." At Chez Panisse, the kitchen was stocked with vinegars made by Albert Katz, who remains one of the few producers in the United States using what he calls the Orleans method, fermenting and aging vinegar in oak barrels without the aid of an acetator—a machine that pumps oxygen into the product, vastly speeding up the fermentation process but also limiting the complexity of flavor.

After a brief stint in Kenya, where she developed recipes for a coffee-exporting company and honed her fermentation skills with the help of a food-scientist colleague, Crawford moved to New York, where she worked as the "Minister of Culture" at the Criterion Collection's offices, cooking meals for visiting filmmakers and staff. By 2019, she was working in restaurants again, making vinegar at home, and in a relationship with the radio producer Ira Glass. "When you would open the door, the thing right in front of you would be these buckets floating with this black, viscous sort of gunk, and weird white foam coming off it," Glass recalled. (The two have split up but remain close.) "It really had the feeling of going into your girlfriend's apartment and discovering she's, like, the Joker, planning to poison Gotham City."

The success of Tart Vinegar is in part attributable to the pandemic, when the concept of a well-stocked pantry became central to the culinary Zeitgeist. In 2020, during lockdown, some restaurants opened their larders to stay afloat, selling their go-to olive oils and anchovies. Chefs and recipe developers offering cooking demonstrations on social media showcased the staples they relied on at home, and amateur cooks across the country began to amass enviable collections of shelf-stable products: Diaspora Co. single-origin spices, Rancho Gordo dried beans, Fly by Jing Sichuan chili crisp. In the years since, the market for upscale pantry items seems only to have grown. Perhaps the savviest new player in the world of vinegar is a company called Acid League, whose mass-produced offerings seem almost cynically designed to appeal to the urban millennial palate—flavors include Strawberry Rosé and Pink Peppercorn Honey Yuzu—and can be found at Whole Foods and Kroger.

To say that Crawford doesn't consider a brand like Acid League to be competition is an indication not of arrogance but of the fact that she doesn't see her craft as competitive. A few times a year, she teaches a three-hour class for enthusiasts who want to make their own vinegar at home; she has no interest in scaling the business beyond what she can produce by hand, tinkering happily among her buckets. On the day I spent with her, we stopped at the Union Square Greenmarket, where she goes at least once a week, foraging for what could become vinegar—Vermont maple syrup, lavender grown on Long Island, perilla from the Catskills. "If it doesn't taste good raw, it won't taste good fermented," she said—and, if it tastes good raw, turning it into vinegar is like preserving it in edible amber. At the factory, she plunged her arms elbow-deep into her newest batches, swishing around the pungent matter, nudging it toward its next life. ♦

ON TELEVISION

BURN BOOK

"Feud: Capote vs. the Swans," on FX.

BY INKOO KANG

Truman Capote couldn't have fully appreciated his good fortune while writing the true-crime masterpiece "In Cold Blood." By the time his so-called nonfiction novel was published—with its many creative licenses—the two killers whose lives he'd dramatized had been executed; they couldn't talk back. He wasn't so lucky with his next major project, "Answered Prayers," which he claimed would be his magnum opus. In one of its chapters, published in *Esquire* under the title "La Côte Basque, 1965," he exposed close-held secrets of the friends and muses he called his swans: a set of graying socialites who'd achieved fashion-plate fame. They quickly closed ranks—and, in the decade between the excerpt's release and his death, in 1984, Capote failed to complete "Answered Prayers," or any other book-length manuscript.

His exile from Manhattan high society, and his accompanying artistic decline, is the subject of the new season of the Ryan Murphy anthology drama "Feud," subtitled "Capote vs. the Swans." Capote's 1948 début novel, "Other Voices, Other Rooms," with its queer characters and famously naughty author photo, introduced him as a convention-flouting wunderkind. Those days of youthful defiance are long gone by the time "Capote vs. the Swans" opens, in the late sixties, with Capote (Tom Hollander) suggesting to his closest confidante, Babe Paley (Naomi Watts), that there's no higher happiness than material comfort. After discovering that her husband, Bill, is engaged in his umpteenth affair, Babe is contemplating divorce, but Capote discourages it, citing her age and Bill's stature as the chairman of CBS. "You have a great life," he reminds her. "You have a house in Bermuda, a mansion in Coral Gables, the thing in London." He hands Babe a pill to knock back with some Scotch. Their conversation, which began with his entreaty to "tell me *everything*," ends with her cradled in his arms. It won't be the last time we see Capote's attraction to—and minimization of—female pain.

In the 2021 book "Capote's Women: A True Story of Love, Betrayal, and a Swan Song for an Era," Laurence Leamer theorizes that it was a combination of style, beauty, wealth, and woe that drew the author to his female friends. The playwright Jon Robin Baitz, who adapted Leamer's work for the series alongside the director Gus Van Sant, offers another possibility: Capote's unconscious loathing for silk-stockinged snobs like Lee Radziwill (Calista Flockhart), Slim Keith (Diane Lane), and C. Z. Guest (Chloë Sevigny) stems from the knowledge that they would never have countenanced a brassy striver like his own mother (Jessica Lange), who died by suicide years prior. Lange's performance as a spiteful ghost urging her son to join her in Hell would feel more at home in another tragi-camp Ryan Murphy offering: "American Horror Story."

If only it were *fun*. The season's fatal flaw, though, isn't its mawkishness or its self-seriousness but its lack of sufficient plot to sustain eight episodes. "Capote vs. the Swans" is about a book that refuses to be written, a sobriety that won't stick, a pardon that won't come. It's a story about a squandering of talent that wastes its own potential. The swans have some subplots—Slim appoints herself the enforcer of Capote's expulsion, Babe becomes eager to make peace following a cancer diagnosis, and Lee is eaten up by her jealousy toward her peerless older sister, Jackie Kennedy—but, for the most part, the women are scarcely differentiated from one another. That gives none of the actresses much opportunity to stand out. The years-long grudge the swans

Capote was drawn to his swans by their style, beauty, wealth, and woe.

ILLUSTRATION BY MALIKA FAVRE

hold against their former friend devolves into a P.R. war to be won by whoever seems the least pathetic. The victor certainly isn't Capote, who dissipates the good will of his ex-boyfriend Jack Dunphy (Joe Mantello) with his descent into alcoholism and deliberately courts beatings from his churlish lover John O'Shea (Russell Tovey) with his sharp tongue.

It's a wincingly unflattering portrait of the artist as a self-destructive has-been—perhaps even a needlessly candid one. (That's no fault of Hollander's; he manages to find the wounded, whiny humanity amid Capote's many idiosyncrasies.) It's harder to know how much sympathy we're meant to extend to the swans. Leamer's book contextualized them in a bygone milieu: a post-war, pre-feminist Wasp oligarchy in which young women's ambitions were directed exclusively toward an advantageous match. After the wedding, their stations depended on cultivating inane expertise (heaven help the woman who sent out party invitations in the wrong shade of cream) and placing their husbands' desires above their own, even if that meant enduring years of abuse (as the real-life Barbara Paley was alleged to have done). The poignancy of the friendships between the actual Capote and the swans derived from their shared precarity: the author forced to play the "homosexual court jester singing for his supper," as Babe puts it in "Feud," and the women ever anxious about the false promise of marital stability. Babe calls Capote her "second husband" and, later, declares that gay men "won't drop you after you reach a certain age—if anything, they lift you higher." But Baitz's insights into these dynamics are limited—and delivered in distractingly modern terms. At one point, Capote describes a swan as a "privileged, wealthy white woman"; during one of their many wine-soaked lunches, Babe labels his betrayal an instance of "misogyny."

Baitz throws out other half-developed ideas: that Capote's disloyalty was payback for some of the swans' two-faced homophobia, or that he wrote "La Côte Basque" in order to free himself from their clutches. But these scattershot hypotheses fail to persuade or to cohere, which only adds to the air of aimless repetition. To make up for the absence of incident, the narrative jumps around frantically in time. Thus we attend the Black and White Ball, a lavish party thrown by Capote at the Plaza nine years before the "Côte Basque" debacle. In Baitz's telling, the planning of the event is chronicled by the Maysles brothers, filmmakers renowned for their cinéma-vérité approach. The episode itself—the season's strongest—is framed as a monochrome documentary, and Albert Maysles gives "Answered Prayers" its title when the swans' gilded cage reminds him of a quote attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones."

A swan can never rest. In "Feud," Capote explains the women's epithet by pointing to their arduous efforts to appear effortless: "Underneath the crisp surface of the water, they have to paddle twice as fast and vigorously as an ordinary duck just to stay afloat." But, for all the swans' monologues about the challenges of womanhood, the nature of their suffering remains vague. We never truly see the contents of the fateful *Esquire* article, whose viciousness is sanded down in ways that obscure the brutality of their world. In the real piece, one woman is described by another as a "white-trash slut"; in the show, Capote merely observes that the members of his coterie have been known to engage in "subtle" classism.

Baitz still tries to make us feel the excerpt's impact. In the immediate aftermath of the scandal, Capote is visited by James Baldwin (Chris Chalk), who argues for the revolutionary potential of "Answered Prayers" as an indictment of a decadent American aristocracy. Much of the encounter reads like an apology for the season's focus on the swans, whom Baldwin dismisses as "porcelain trinkets." There's a part of Capote that agrees. But his alliance with the other novelist is both convenient and unconvincing. The two men are presented as fellow-outsiders, trading compliments about the importance of each other's work—never mind that the real Capote deemed Baldwin's fiction "crudely written and of a balls-aching boredom." The same could more fairly be said of "Feud," whose protagonist would turn in his grave if he knew that his lowest moments inspired such tedium. ♦

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THE THEATRE

LUSH LIFE

"Days of Wine and Roses" and "The Animal Kingdom."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

It's hard to know—or maybe, really, to admit—that you drink too much. After all, you might just be a fun guy. The sort who orders half the menu at a dinner for two, using each cocktail or glass of wine as a kind of musical notation, a mark of rest between courses, helping the unhurried night grow long and lively. Three drinks in, or four, neon signs blur with companionate charm, and the lights dotting bridges (you see them from the back of your car as you head to the next party) spread calmly over the water, offering you peace.

Drink might help you speak up, speed your charisma. It might lift a scrim and put you in better contact with others, and with your own senses. Seamus Heaney once wrote:

> When I unscrewed it
> I smelled the disturbed
> tart stillness of a bush
> rising through the pantry.
>
> When I poured it
> it had a cutting edge
> and flamed
> like Betelgeuse.

If that bright flame makes you too wild now and then, makes you wake up with a tart taste in your mouth, having forgotten how you ended up in bed, and you start to measure hangovers in weeks instead of mornings . . . who can say? You might've just had a bad month. You've been looking for light.

One such fun-loving innocent is Joe Clay (Brian d'Arcy James), the rascal whose penchant for drink is the igniting spark of "Days of Wine and Roses," a new musical at Studio 54, directed by Michael Greif—based on the play by J. P. Miller from 1958 and the Blake Edwards film from 1962—with a book by Craig Lucas and music and lyrics by Adam Guettel. We first meet Joe at a work event in nineteen-fifties New York, a glass of amber liquid in hand, chatting up his boss's pretty, new secretary, Kirsten Arnesen (Kelli O'Hara). Joe's a Korean War veteran, recently back Stateside. Kirsten's the daughter of a taciturn Norwegian. She grew up on a farm; her wit is city-ready.

It's easy to see what part alcohol plays in Joe's life. It spurs on his charmer's flirty patter and makes him bold when the moment's ripe for risk. From the start, Joe—pure personality—is fixated on wooing Kirsten. Early on, she lets slip that she doesn't drink. He seems to take it as a challenge. Soon we see them at dinner. He feeds her a sweet drink, and she doesn't hate it as much as she thought she would. The buzz is nice. A horror story begins.

Guettel's music sets a tipsy, disorienting mood. The show—a tale of two drunks and their dangerous passage through the years—stays emotionally plausible because it never allows itself to burst into anthemic songs that could be plucked out of context and placed on the pop charts. Instead, O'Hara and James sing tilting lines of chromatic melody. Here, music is a way of communicating the topsy-turvy logic of a long night and its sloppy seductions. Drunkenness has a whole sensorium of its own: just from the sound—and the smooth, swaying conducting of the show's music director, Kimberly Grigsby, visible on a perch stage right—you can almost smell the air of certain rooms, sour with booze and smoke.

When Joe and Kirsten are at their most happily plastered, flying high over their worries and the widening chasm of their shared problem, they indulge in a cheerful ditty. They're shuffling among drinks, pulling spirit after spirit out of bags, singing a pure-hearted ode to champagne, with its "little evanescent bubbles

"Days of Wine and Roses" shows how alcohol can fill up the spaces in a relationship.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

erasing everything!" It's all about the narrowing enclosure of a relationship circumscribed by addiction—the type of giddy love that starts to slide downward as soon as it hits its crest:

> Two dolphins breakin' a wave
> Two dolphins right to the grave . . .
> Sometimes I feel like I am riding on an arrow
> On the needle of a compass
> Spinning counterclockwise
> Just a gust of air
> With all this water everywhere
> I'm leaning out the window
> I'm running with a knife
> I'm riding on an arrow
> I'm running for my life
> What's the worry
> I have you now
> You are all I need

It's a happy, seasick song that accentuates the strong voices of both singers. While they woozily harmonize and belt, they dance. Sergio Trujillo and Karla Puno Garcia have choreographed evocative, efficient, droll numbers that call to mind old show-biz glamour, and also the dark-edged phrase "high functioning"—how a pair of really fizzy drunks can look and feel great while spinning ever closer to the brink.

But this kind of fun never lasts. The night slumps, a short life becomes a half-conscious montage, ice waters down your drink and you order another too quickly on its heels. Joe and Kirsten have a baby, and their unfitness for their new roles as parents becomes immediately apparent.

The show is best—and the whole thing is quite good—when it demonstrates how alcohol, trickily liquid, can fill the spaces in a relationship, helping to bring it together but also inevitably driving it apart. That great time starts to stink if you can't stop going back to the well. Soon it's time to look around and start over.

One of the subtler touches of the lighting in "Days of Wine and Roses" is how it eventually gives the audience a sense of the daytime, once Joe gets sober and acquires an A.A. sponsor (played by a warm-spirited David Jennings). Most of Joe and Kirsten's story unfolds at night, that dark cloak for excess, but drying up lets a bit of sunshine in. So does having someone to talk to outside the household. Broaden your circle and brighten up a tad. "The Animal Kingdom," a new play by Ruby Thomas, at the Connelly Theatre, directed by Jack Serio, takes place entirely within a group-therapy setting, showing how talk can be a balm, even if only for a while.

Sam (Uly Schlesinger), a troubled college student, fresh off an attempt at taking his own life, is now living at a rehab institution. He's smart, intense, and full of nervous energy. His counsellor, Daniel (Calvin Leon Smith), provides a counterpoint to Sam's obvious physical discomfort: Daniel is snappily dressed, in a brown-orange sweater and matching socks, his loafers giving off a slight shine; he's warm where Sam is defensively cool, ever more patient when Sam seems about to snap. They're in a room with a two-way mirror—the only room in this willfully claustrophobic play.

The story unfolds in the course of six mandated sessions with Sam's family. His talkative mother (Tasha Lawrence), his vault-tight father (David Cromer), and his nervously nice younger sister (Lily McInerny, in a nuanced, moving performance) take turns trading impressions and feelings, offering something of a biography of Sam and hinting at the family dynamics—current and generational—that might have brought them all to this sorrowful crux. It's hard to keep a play like this from becoming too schmaltzy or too gratuitous a spectacle of trauma and pain, but Thomas's agile, empathetic writing maintains a balance.

Sam is queer and congenitally sad, but he's privileged, too, and he knows it. One of the problems itching at his brain is his family's money. His dad, sprung from humble beginnings, leads corporate takeovers, raiding companies for spare, sellable parts. His sensitive, anti-capitalist son wants some distance from all that activity, even though it has paid for his education, and for his time in this facility. Perhaps his highest privilege in this moment is Daniel's presence. Smith plays him with a velvet toughness that reaches past the stage and into the audience; his performance is a marvel of clarity, and a kind of love. His note-perfect friendliness is a reminder that beyond war and boredom, anxiety and sorrow—whatever might drive you to drink or self-harm—are human voices, our true intoxicants, harder to access but easier to hold on to for good, always waiting to step in and soothe. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

REALMS OF THE SENSES

"The Taste of Things" and "Ennio."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The stuff you learn at the cinema. For example, until I saw the latest film from Trần Anh Hùng, "The Taste of Things," I had no idea that the French for "Baked Alaska" is *omelette norvégienne*. Weird. Elsewhere, the movie offers an everyday tip: gently work your fingers under the skin of a chicken and insert thin slices of truffle, the better to infuse the tender flesh. Probably a good idea to kill the chicken first.

Most of Trần's movie is—or appears to be—about food and drink, and it is set in, around, and near a manor house in provincial France. The date, by my calculations, is the mid-eighteen-eighties. There's a sprightly walk by a river, and a paradisiacal lunch at a long table under the trees, but we never see the bustle of a town or hear the hoot of a train. The house is owned by Dodin (Benoît Magimel), whose vocation is that of a gourmet. He has a loyal cook, Eugénie (Juliette Binoche), although, from the start, there is an unusual blurring of social boundaries. The kitchen is Eugénie's dominion, yet Dodin is often to be found there, helping to prepare the next meal, and at one point he takes over entirely, devising an incomparable dinner for her alone. (This is where the truffle trick comes in.) As she sits and savors it, resplendent in a butter-yellow dress with a high lace collar, one has to ask, Who is at the service of whom?

This being France, one pleasure drips into another. Now and then, Dodin goes to Eugénie's bedroom door, seeking admittance. There is no sense of droit du seigneur; it's more as if they have agreed upon a discreet romantic affinity, and the question of why they have never wed, and whether the knot might yet be tied, is openly aired. "Marriage is a dinner that begins with dessert," Dodin says. The casting helps; Magimel, stocky and solicitous, is the opposite of rakish, and Binoche, as ever, is nobody's fool, with a laugh as nourishingly earthy as the vegetable that she holds, uprooted from the soil, in the opening moments of the film. (The two actors were formerly a couple in real life, and had a daughter in 1999.) Invited to join Dodin and his friends—all of whom are rightly in awe of her—to consume a sumptuous feast that she has made, Eugénie demurs, preferring to stay in the kitchen. "I converse with you in the dining room through what you eat," she says.

The creation of that dinner fills the first half hour of the story. If too many cooks on TV, factual or fictional, have led you to expect a steaming jambalaya of shouts, showoffs, panic stations, and free-range oaths, Trần's film will come as a calm and clear surprise: a consommé devoutly to be wished. The action is purposeful and brisk, but unrushed, as if practice had long ago made perfect. Eugénie says little as she labors, aside from polite requests for the next ingredient ("the loin of veal, please"), and we stare in amazement as a fish the length of an arm is coiled into a copper pan half the size of a bathtub. Not that the monster of the deep will be eaten; it is but a single component of a stock that will then be reduced and strained, the better to invest a silken sauce. And the moral is: you can't have a molehill without a mountain, and you've never tasted molehills like these.

Trần's concern with food, and with how it can both bind and divide those who consume it, was already evident in his début feature, "The Scent of Green Papaya" (1993). It was set in his native Vietnam, though filmed in France, where he had moved at the age of twelve. Frequent tracking shots lent the movie its tranquil poise, but there were also gleaming closeups of greens a-sizzle in a hot pan, and "The Taste of Things" takes that curiosity to a more complex level, with the camera moving around Eugénie's kitchen as if under her confident command, and rising over the rim of a pot to inspect—practically to inhale—the fragrance of whatever miracle is unfolding within.

One person guiding us through "The Scent of Green Papaya" was a young servant girl, and the same is true of the new film. Pauline (Bonnie Chagneau-Ravoire) is on hand to learn the culinary ropes, yet she is, despite the face that she pulls when sampling marrowbone, more than a novice. She is a prodigy. "Mushrooms, fennel, tomatoes, oranges, wine," she says, listing what she detects in a sip of *sauce bourguignonne*. "Bay leaf, cumin, juniper berry, clove." She can't stop. "Astonishing girl," Dodin murmurs to Eugénie. Were the French

Juliette Binoche and Benoît Magimel star in Trần Anh Hùng's film.

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

ever to make their own version of "X-Men," Pauline could appear as a character named Palate or Gustator. If I had to pickle and preserve one frame of Trần's movie, it would show the expression of infinite wonder with which Pauline greets a mouthful of crayfish vol-au-vent. How about the *omelette norvégienne*? "I almost cried," she admits.

For all this rapture, however, "The Taste of Things" is not a foodie film. It doesn't belong on the shelf beside "Tampopo" (1987), "Babette's Feast" (1988), or "Chocolat" (2000), an earlier and less digestible Binoche project. I didn't run out of the cinema and race to the nearest Michelin-starred restaurant, or immediately buy a large rhomboid vessel for poaching turbot, as deployed by Eugénie. I had a glass of wine and a bowl of potato chips. What Trần delivers, in other words, is not always an incitement to drool (look at Dodin, reaching into a bird to drag out the guts), and Dodin and his confrères are amused, rather than impressed, by an overstuffed banquet—"no air, no logic, no line"—that is forced upon them by a visiting nobleman. In return, Dodin dares to propose a simple pot-au-feu.

So what kind of movie *is* this? A conservative one, I would say, not in politics (a topic that never arises at the table) but in its devotion to long-ripened skills and to the sheer hard work that goes into the giving of pleasure. "One cannot be a gourmet before forty," Dodin remarks, and his dining pals are neither snobs nor swaggerers but comfortable, solid professional men, including a doctor and a notary, who meet to eat: the very picture of the bourgeoisie. If that turns your stomach, it's worth pointing out that "The Taste of Things" is crosshatched, in ways that I didn't foresee and won't disclose, with shadows of ailing and grief; its closest predecessor, in this respect, is Bertrand Tavernier's beautiful "Sunday in the Country" (1984). These are films about the grave comedy of being alive, and about submitting to the seasons by which a life is meted out. Mortality is no more of a natural shock than the onset of winter. As the Duke in "Measure for Measure" informs us, "Thou hast nor youth nor age,/But as it were an after-dinner's sleep,/Dreaming on both." If you had just enjoyed Eugénie's roast veal with braised lettuce hearts, plus a bottle of Clos Vougeot, you could die happy and sleep for good.

The new documentary about the composer Ennio Morricone, Giuseppe Tornatore's "Ennio," is not new at all. It was screened at festivals as far back as 2021; only now has it earned an American release. This is a welcome prospect, not least because of the revelation that, although the young Ennio's ambition was to be a doctor, his father demanded that he study the trumpet instead. Listen out for a loud collective crack, as the jaws of a hundred New York parents hit the floor.

The roster of directors who employed—or yielded to—Morricone is laughably distinguished, and headed by Sergio Leone. (As an old photograph shows, they were schoolboys together.) "Ennio" confirms the legend that Morricone's score was played on set during the shooting of Leone's "Once Upon a Time in America" (1984), as if to steep the actors in the desired emotional mood. No one is more indebted to Morricone than Tornatore, whose "Cinema Paradiso" (1990) might well have slipped the world's attention without Morricone's music. In repaying the debt, so to speak, "Ennio" turns out to be overlong, overblown, and larded with such praises that Morricone, a modest if determined soul, would blush to hear them. The jazz guitarist Pat Metheny describes "Cinema Paradiso" as "one of the profound, iconic, artistic places for me that I reference constantly." As a rule, distrust those who use the word "iconic," unless they specialize in the art of the Orthodox Church.

No Morricone score is more delicious, or more devilish, than the one he wrote for Henri Verneuil's "The Sicilian Clan" (1970), concealing within it a coded tribute to Bach. The film has a mythologically strong cast—Jean Gabin, Lino Ventura, and Alain Delon—and I revere it so much that I even have a *Hungarian* poster for it, with a grainy Delon wearing shades and gripping a gun. But here's the catch: not once have I actually watched "The Sicilian Clan." I'm told that it's O.K. but not great, so why devastate the ideal by embracing the merely real? Instead, I intend to keep the film forever out of reach, tormenting myself with Morricone's music, which glides around in circles and fades away as if reluctant to end. For those of us who still retreat to the cinema's womb, our most joyful agony is not to encounter movies that are foolish or horrible or broken-backed. It is to imagine, eyes wide shut, all the movies that we shall never see. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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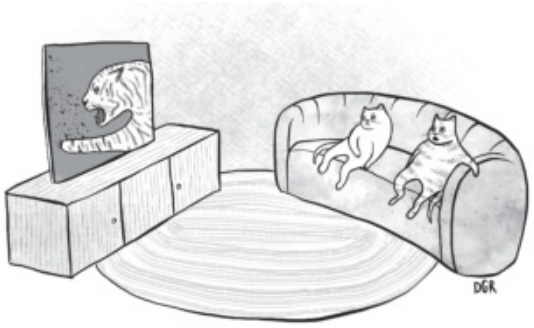
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, must be received by Sunday, February 18th. The finalists in the January 29th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 4th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

" "

THE FINALISTS



"Sure, he's big. But can he manipulate humans like we do?"
J. J. Bartz, Kalamazoo, Mich.

"I just wasn't expecting 'Tony: The Frosted Flakes Story' to swing this dark."
Isabel Parigi, New York City

"You knew I was domesticated when you married me, Margaret."
Jesse Kavadlo, Chesterfield, Mo.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"Just one round, or two out of three?"
Erin Viehl, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

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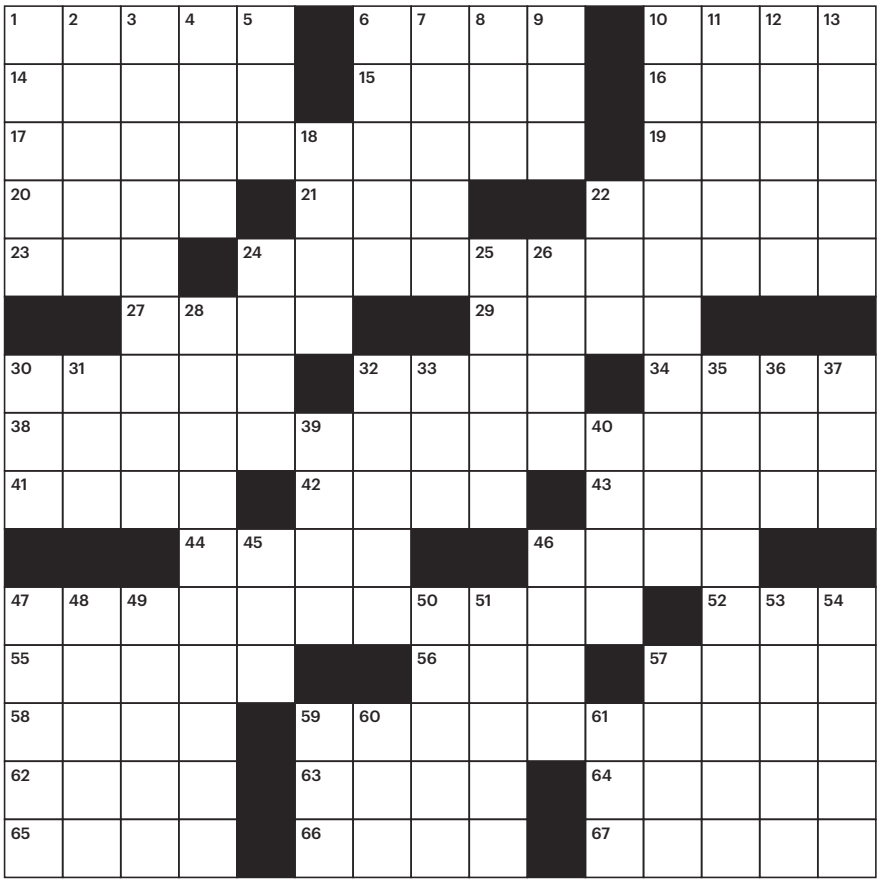
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

A themed anniversary crossword.

BY WILL NEDIGER



ACROSS

1 Opposite of ecstasy
6 Exam with biochem content
10 Disney villain often compared to Shakespeare's Claudius
14 Rhyme for "Chevy" in the song "American Pie"
15 ___ Writers' Workshop (vaunted graduate program in the Midwest)
16 Who said "knock you out," in an LL Cool J hit
17 *1968 movie based on a *New Yorker* short story by John Cheever
19 Item pictured on a "No Vaping" sign
20 Accidentally replies-all, say
21 Business end of a Bic
22 Southwest vehicle
23 Rhyme for "dry" in the song "American Pie"
24 *1967 movie based on a series of *New Yorker* articles by Truman Capote
27 "Chess" pieces?
29 Boathouse supplies
30 Aquarium scuzz
32 "Milk and Honey" poet Rupi
34 Subject of a basic golf lesson
38 *1944 movie based on a series of *New Yorker* short stories by Sally Benson
41 "Unless my memory deceives me," online
42 February 14th, casually
43 Ancient region near Lydia
44 Hurried, quaintly
46 Some adoptive couples
47 *2007 movie based on a *New Yorker* short story by Alice Munro
52 Mushy food
55 Numbers on Monopoly deeds
56 Particle with a charge
57 It might transform into a bed
58 Bolognese sauce, for one
59 *2002 movie in which a Susan Orlean work is described as "that sprawling *New Yorker* shit" . . . or what the answer to each starred clue is
62 "Top Chef" appliance
63 City with the fashionable Via Condotti
64 Planet sometimes called Earth's twin
65 "Mistakes ___ made"
66 "Step right ___ way!"
67 In an appropriate manner

DOWN

1 Adjust for a better fit
2 Frank who designed Prague's Dancing House
3 Enthusiastic to a fault
4 Loch that attracts cryptozoologists
5 Poisonous evergreen
6 Do an impersonation of
7 Order with a side and a drink
8 Amazement
9 La Brea material
10 "Whatever you're up to in the kitchen, keep doing it!"
11 Butter bean?
12 Essential ___ acids
13 Threw a temper tantrum
18 Cozy lodgings
22 Inexpensive beer brand, for short
24 Celebrity couple
25 Good-for-nothing
26 Pub projectile
28 Notes that are easy to remember?
30 "Is that true about me?"
31 Hula dancer's garland
32 Term of affection similar to "sport"
33 Cuban-born film star de Armas
35 Takes charge of a project
36 "Richard ___" (play with the opening line "Now is the winter of our discontent")
37 Anti-smoking ad, e.g.
39 Even a single time
40 Fabulist, less charitably
45 "No ___, ands, or buts"
46 What a body shop may fix with a suction cup
47 Classic cursor shape
48 Extension sewn into one's hair
49 Fury
50 City with the historic Hampton House
51 Aspirations
53 ___ of (in conflict with)
54 Flower whose name comes from the French for "thought"
57 Bit of choreography
59 Curator's focus
60 Exclamation from Homer Simpson
61 "The Night of the Iguana" star Gardner

Solution to the previous puzzle:

B	A	C	A	R	D	I	■	S	T	A	R	T	O	N
E	T	O	N	I	A	N	■	P	O	M	P	A	N	O
H	O	R	S	E	S	H	O	E	M	A	G	N	E	T
A	N	N	A	N	■	E	P	E	E	S	■	G	P	A
P	E	E	R	■	D	R	E	D	■	S	T	E	A	L
P	R	A	I	R	I	E	D	O	G	■	E	L	I	O
Y	S	L	■	T	E	N	S	■	R	E	S	O	R	T
■	■	■	L	E	S	T	■	M	A	L	T	■	■	■
R	E	P	O	S	E	■	S	O	C	K	■	M	S	U
O	N	L	Y	■	L	E	A	V	E	S	T	O	W	N
S	T	I	E	G	■	A	R	E	S	■	O	R	A	N
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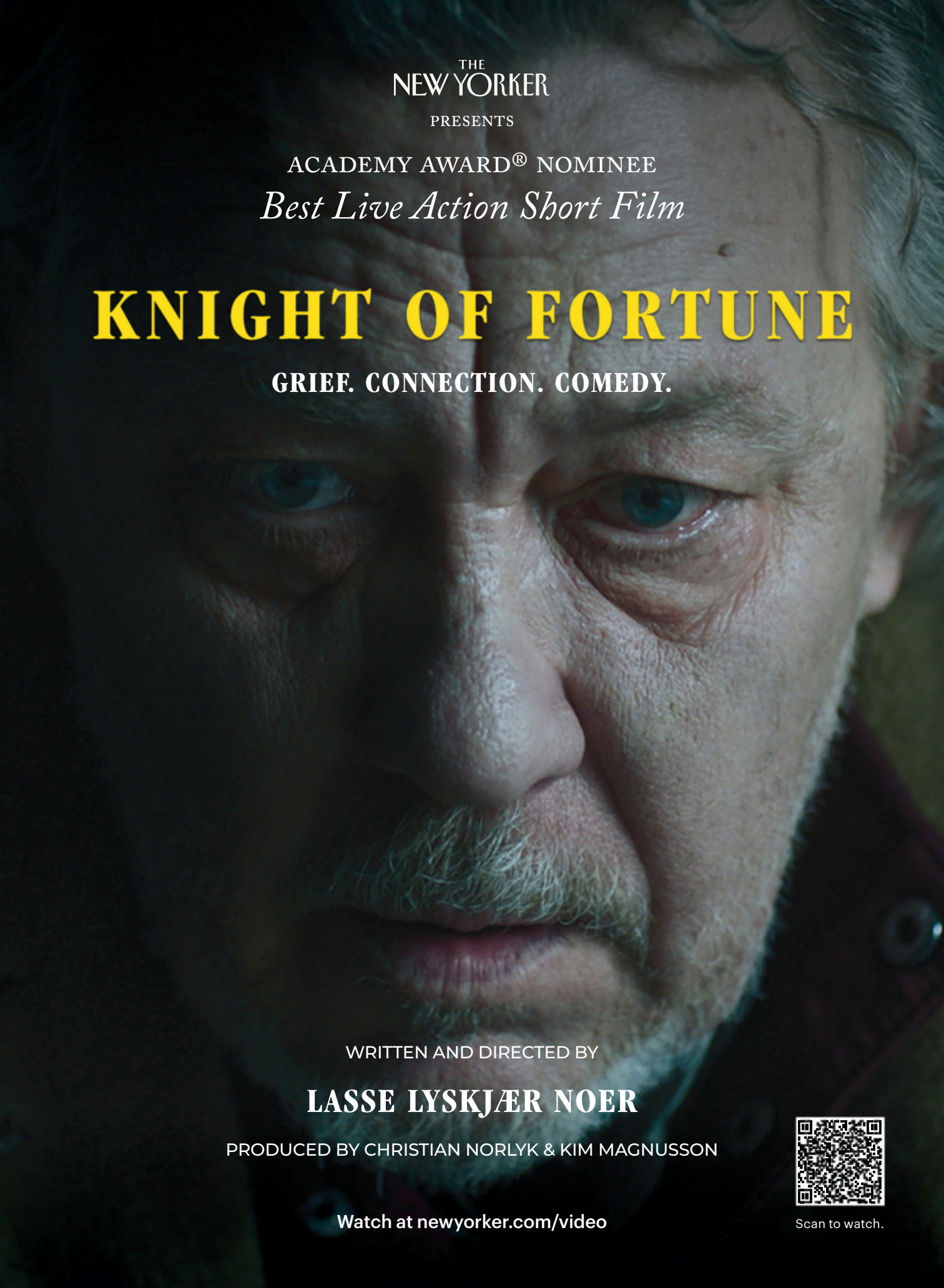
Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**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